

THE SHATTERED TALES



A FROG PRINCE RETELLING

TO BETRAY A KING

ANNETTE K. LARSEN



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TO BETRAY A KING

Annette K. Larsen

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To anyone who wants to break free of a tough situation.
You can do it.
I believe in you.

Prologue
Before

The Royal Palace
Kingdom of Morwen

I sat upright in bed at the sound of scratching on my door. Despite the midnight hour, I hadn't been sleeping. I hadn't slept for three days, not since Prince O'Therion had laid siege to the royal palace of Morwen—my home.

The scratching came again, and I slipped from my bed and padded to the door. I didn't lift the latch but instead pressed my mouth close to the door and said, "Yes?"

"We've found a way out. Gather your things."

Though my heart was in my throat, I didn't hesitate. This was the outcome I'd been hoping and planning for, but I hadn't thought it could be a reality. Prince O'Therion and his men had kept me separated from my parents and sister, but our loyal servants had found a way to pass messages between us and coordinate our departure.

My escape.

It wasn't just a political coup from which we needed to flee; for me it was so much more than that. I was supposed to *marry* Prince O'Therion, but not like this. Our wedding had been meant to ensure peace between Morwen and Lyastra. His arrival was supposed to be for the purpose of celebrating the impending alliance between our kingdoms and personally getting to know one another better. O'Therion had decided on a different approach. He'd taken the castle by force, usurped my father's position, and *still* planned to marry me. But instead of the wedding happening four months from now, he intended for us to wed in three days. With the entire kingdom as witnesses, he planned to wed me, thus solidifying his claim to my father's throne and forcing Morwen under his rule.

Grabbing the wrapper from my bedpost, I pulled it on and cinched it at the waist as I crossed to my wardrobe. I winced only a little when the sharp pain in my side reminded me of the large bruise above my right hip—a betrothal gift from O'Therion that he'd given me the day he arrived. I carefully opened the heavy doors, threw a cloak around my shoulders, and dug out the pack that I had prepared for this moment. There was no time for me to dress properly. I shoved my feet into boots and hefted the straps of the pack onto my shoulders before crossing back to the door and lifting the latch.

I pulled it open slowly, determined not to make a sound, and peeked out.

Gerard, a footman, stepped from the shadows across the hall and beckoned me out. I went silently, closing my door behind me, and let him take my elbow so that he could lead me silently through the dark castle.

We were near enough to the stables that I smelled the horses when I could hold my peace no longer.

"Where is my family?" I had to ask.

"Each is being led out by a different route," he reminded me.

Of course I knew that. We'd all agreed it would be easier to slip away one at a time instead of all together, but it still made me nervous. Until we were away from here—until I no longer had the threat of being forced to marry the man who had taken our home and our kingdom—I would not be able to breathe easy.

*The Royal Palace
Kingdom of Tride
Three months later*

I walked the echoing corridors carefully, my feet shushing against the stone beneath my slippers. Sometimes I felt like a ghost in this castle—a specter that was unwanted but couldn't leave. I knew that this half-life was better than no life at all. Being a burden to my cousin, the king, was better than the alternative.

I walked to the railing and looked down at the bustle of activity in the courtyard below. Several servants walked behind me, but even though I tried to catch their eyes and smile, none of them acknowledged me. Sometimes I almost enjoyed the way I could walk about without notice. Today it grated against my nerves. Perhaps I should return to the rooms I shared with my family, but my father's simmering agitation and my mother's worry had felt stifling this morning.

"Princess Faelyn," someone called from behind me.

I turned. A servant was approaching with her head down, clearly uncomfortable with whatever task she'd been given.

"Yes?" I answered.

She dipped a curtsy when she reached me but didn't raise her eyes to mine.

"King Jeshua asks for your presence in his study."

"Thank you. I will go there straightaway."

She curtsied again and scurried down the corridor.

I took a deep breath and straightened my spine. A large mirror to my left caught my eye. I didn't look like myself. My lifeless eyes seemed to belong to someone I didn't know, and yet they were there, in my face. I turned away from the image and walked back the way I'd come. My hand went automatically to the necklace that hung around my neck. It had once belonged to my brother, but after his passing, it had been entrusted to me as the rightful heir to Morwen's throne. Of course, it was a mere sentimental bauble now. There was no throne for me to inherit anymore.

When I reached the stairs, I climbed to the third floor and then traversed two corridors before reaching the thick wooden door, flanked by two guards who stood sentinel outside the king's study. They barely looked at me. The utter indifference from the guards still felt strange. Back in Morwen, I knew all the guards by name. I'd grown up with them. I knew their families. They had respected me and obeyed without question, but there had also been a camaraderie between my family and those who were entrusted with our security. But these guards—Jeshua's guards—were cold. Just like the castle. Just like the king.

I knocked twice.

"Enter."

One guard reached over and opened the door so I could step inside, then closed it behind me.

My cousin, King Jeshua, looked up from where he sat behind an enormous desk.

"Ah, Faelyn. Thank you for coming."

I sank into a curtsy, then held my hands delicately in front of me, the long sleeves of my gown draping down from my elbows. "Of course, sire."

He leaned back in his chair and studied me for several uncomfortable seconds. I hated it when he did this. Though he was my cousin, our relationship had always been polite and superficial at best, but in moments like these I wanted to roll my eyes. His father had died only last year, so not only was he a young king at only thirty-one years old, but he was also a new king. Despite that, he had more

arrogance than almost anyone else I'd met.

Almost.

Prince O'Therion had been even worse, but he'd not only been arrogant but also vicious. Once he'd shown his true colors, it was terrifying to even be in the same room as him. He'd been cruel and violent, and he'd enjoyed watching the suffering of those around him.

"You are unhappy here," Jeshua said.

Yes. If I were honest, I would call myself bitterly lonely, but I couldn't say that to the man who'd taken me in. I owed him too great a debt. "No, sire. Of course not."

"You are," he said plainly. "Anyone in your position would be. You were forced from your home."

"We are safe and protected here." The last thing I or my family needed was for Jeshua to believe we didn't appreciate his hospitality. We were doing our best to gather information and allies from within Morwen, but communication was dangerous and slow.

Jeshua tilted his head just a little. "That is not the same as being happy. You believe yourself a burden to me."

Well. There wasn't much I could say to that. He was right.

"We are family, you and I. And as such, I consider it my duty and obligation to care for you, but I also know that your position here must be distasteful to you. None of us want to be a burden." He raised his eyebrows at me and waited. Apparently he wouldn't get on with whatever it was he wanted to say unless I answered out loud.

Fine. "You are right, Your Highness. I have no wish to be a burden."

He smiled, which was unusual enough, but there was something calculated in that smile that made my gut tighten. "I believe you and I can help one another. Though I cannot help your father reclaim his throne, I can at least give you the opportunity to earn your place here so that you might never feel yourself a burden again."

What a relief that would be. "I'm happy to serve the throne of Tride in any capacity." I'd always been good at diplomacy, and interacting with people of any station came naturally to me. Perhaps I could be an ambassador or help with negotiations. "What would you have me do?"

He pushed his thumb along his lower lip, considering. "There is someone who was once a trusted friend of mine. He knew my strengths and my flaws. He knew my secrets. But he betrayed me and now lives as a traitor in Dalthia. I have not slept well for seven years, knowing he has walked free, knowing he's never been held accountable for betraying his king. I want that situation remedied. And I think you are the perfect person to do it."

I blinked. That sounded like a large, complicated problem. "Remedied how?"

"Worry not. You'll only have to follow my instructions, and when you do, you will have the thanks of a grateful king. This is something I have agonized over for years, and if it could only be resolved, I would finally be able to rest easy."

"What would you require of me?" I didn't understand how I could do anything about a traitor. But if I could do this, if I could feel as though I'd really done something for Jeshua, I might start to feel less like an unwanted specter.

"You must travel to Dalthia and find this traitor." He paused before opening a drawer and pulling out a glass vial. "Then you must get him to drink this." He set the vial on the desk, where it sat, looking sinister as the deep-red liquid quivered inside it.

My throat felt swollen, and I had a difficult time swallowing. "What is that?"

"An elixir."

"Will it kill him?" I asked, terrified to hear the answer as I continued to stare at the bottle.

He was silent long enough that I looked up at him. His eyebrows lifted, his face arrogant. "It will make him suffer, as his betrayal has made me suffer."

That didn't answer my question. "Will he be maimed? Crippled?"

"I'm trying to right a wrong, not start a war. I assure you the elixir will have no long-lasting effects other than to ease my own pain."

That was good...if it was true. Surely it was true. Jeshua didn't want a war, certainly not with Dalthia. Although why he would wait so many years after the offense was a mystery. Certainly he hadn't wanted to get his own hands dirty, but why not ask one of his loyal soldiers to do it? "And if I were caught giving this man something that would make him *suffer*, how—"

"Don't get caught," he said bluntly, then leaned forward. "I must express in the most serious terms how important that is. Your first priority is to get him to drink that elixir. But nearly as important is that no one knows it was you. If you are caught, I cannot save you. And they must never know that you were a citizen of Tride."

That's why he'd chosen me. My skin was fairer than the more olive tones of Tride citizens, and my accent was different. Having been raised by a Morwenian father and a Saldian mother, I could pass as either. But that didn't mean I had any desire to play at being a spy. "How could I do such a thing?" I didn't want to do it at all, but I had an awful feeling that saying no might not be an option.

"I leave the how up to you. I didn't say it would be easy, Faelyn. But it *must* be done, and it must be done without anyone knowing who you are."

"How would I even find him?" I asked, trying desperately to make him see what a foolish, impossible plan this was.

"I have spies in Dalthia," he said easily. "I know where William is, and I know where he will be in three days' time."

Three days? He wanted me to carry out these instructions in only three days! "Why me? If you already have spies there, then—"

"I have my reasons."

"I don't know if I can," I admitted as I clenched my hands together in an attempt to stop their shaking.

"Faelyn," he said, his voice stern. "I'm not just your cousin; I am now your king. And your *king* requires this of you."

How could I do it? How could I not? Though he said the concoction would have no lasting effects, was that really true? Or was he asking me to kill a man? I closed my eyes, a tear slipping down my cheek, unable to agree but also unable to tell him no.

"Do you not wish for me to be your king?" he asked, a thread of sinister intent weaving through his words. "Would you rather return to your kingdom?"

I deflated and opened my eyes, seeing clearly that hard glint in his eyes. "You would send me back?"

"Only if I must."

How magnanimous, I thought with bitter sarcasm. "So then, if I do not do as you ask..."

"Then I must send you back to the Lyastran prince." He said it easily and with cold finality. "Please don't make me do that."

It had been three months since Prince O'Therion had laid siege to our castle, but still the echoes of fear from that time pulsed through my body each time I woke in the dead of night.

Having to flee to Tride, watching my father beg for asylum from his nephew had been degrading but necessary. Jeshua had granted us safety and a home in his castle, and I'd foolishly thought he'd done so out of familial obligation, maybe even a small amount of caring.

In the end, it didn't matter the motives. I was at his mercy. He'd laid out my options. I could deliver the elixir—which in all likelihood was actually poison—to the man who had betrayed my cousin, the king. Or he would send me back to Morwen, where I would be forced to marry Prince O'Therion and become his puppet queen.

My voice shook as I said in a whisper, "I will do as my king commands."

"Very good. Make your excuses to your family. Tell them you are going to deliver an important message for me, but tell them no more than that. A maid will be sent to pack a trunk for your journey. You will leave as soon as possible."

When I entered the suite of rooms that my family had been given as living quarters, my younger sister, Ciara, looked up from her sketching table and smiled at me, but it only lasted a second before that smile fell. "What's wrong?" she asked.

Her question drew the attention of both my parents. My mother got to her feet. "You're pale as milk, Faelyn. What has happened?"

"I, uh..." I closed my eyes and shook my head, trying to knock my reality into some semblance of rational thought. "I..."

"Come sit," my mother said, guiding me to a chair and sitting beside me.

She rubbed her hand over my back, and Ciara sat beside me, scooting in close so that she could grab my hand. The look of worry on her face tore at my heart. Twelve-year-olds were not meant to look so burdened.

I mustered a smile for my sister and managed to pull my words together. "I'm all right," I assured her, though it wasn't true.

"No, you're not. You're sad."

I closed my eyes against that truth. I would just have to hope that I could keep the depth of my sadness—my anger and shame—to myself. "You're right," I admitted, tucking a piece of her golden hair back into her bun. It was almost like looking at a reflection of my younger self. We were nine years apart but so similar that no one ever had to wonder if we were sisters. "I am sad because I have to go away. Jeshua has—"

"King Jeshua," my mother corrected.

My nose crinkled in disgust. My mother was so afraid of being turned out by her nephew that she insisted we all treat him with the utmost deference. But now...

now? Any respect or deference, or even tolerance, that I had for him was gone. He was blackmailing me, threatening me! So no, I would not call him by his title.

"Jeshua has ordered me to carry out a task for him."

"What kind of task?" my father asked, coming closer.

"I'm to deliver a message to someone."

My father's eyes were immediately suspicious. "He has couriers and servants to do such things."

"He does not trust any of his servants. This information is so sensitive that he said he could only trust a family member." Lies, the first of many.

My mother shook her head. "But surely he does not need you—"

I brought my eyes over to meet hers. "He asked this of me, Mother. Shall I refuse the king?"

She opened her mouth but didn't speak. Of course I could not refuse. She knew it as well as I did.

“How long will you be gone?” Ciara asked, her eyes blinking at the moisture there.

I pulled her into a hug, partially to comfort her and partially to avoid having to look into her sad eyes. “A fortnight.” It was an overestimation. Traveling to Dalthia would take a couple of days at least, and I didn’t know how long it would take me to convince a man I did not know to drink the unknown substance. “Don’t worry. All will be well.”

I truly hoped that wasn’t another lie, but everything inside of me writhed. How had I gone from being an almost invisible presence here in the castle to being the one person Jeshua had chosen to do something terrible? I wanted to be invisible again—a ghost with no solid form. Instead I was just me...and that didn’t feel like enough.

I walked back into Jeshua’s study, dressed for travel, doing my best to remain calm and unaffected, or at least to appear so. But the moment I saw him, I felt the muscles in my face twitch with anger and disgust.

He glanced up at me, his face lacking any feigned good humor. He just looked at me, hard. I supposed he saw what he wanted, because he got right to the point. “Shall we discuss the particulars of your endeavor?”

“Yes, Your Highness,” I said, biting the words in an attempt to control my anger and contempt.

“You will travel as a commoner since we can’t risk you being recognized or remembered. And since the Dalthians tend to be suspicious of my people, you will tell them you are a Fraug.”

“I’m to be a commoner from Valefraug?”

He nodded crisply. “Just as I said. The journey should take three days. A coachman will drive you, and a maid will accompany you.”

“A maid?” I asked, trying to wrap my head around his plan. “But I’m playing the role of a common Fraug.”

“The maid is not to serve you, Faelyn, but to serve *me*. She will be my eyes and ears. She will give you encouragement when you need it, and she’ll be able to corroborate events as you tell them when you return.”

I pulled my chin back. “You think I would lie to you?”

“Of course.”

Well. At least he wasn’t going to pretend about that.

“There’s also the matter of your reputation to consider. If you are found out, I can’t have your character slandered because you were without proper escort. You’d be no good to me sullied.”

I winced at his crude words, reminded all too clearly of his threat to send me back to Prince O’Therion if I failed. But if I did this for him, perhaps my family and I could leave and go...where? I didn’t know. But this situation made it perfectly clear that we could not continue to rely on Jeshua’s “hospitality” any longer than absolutely necessary.

“So, will the maid be with me all the time?”

“No, that would be too suspicious. William, the man in question, is attending a house party. I’ve instructed the coachman to get a couple of rooms at a nearby inn. If it takes you some time to talk your way into the house party, you can stay the night there at the inn with the maid.”

“How long does the party last?”

“Six days. Plenty of time for you to fulfill your task.”

“All I have to do is put the elixir in William’s drink?”

He nodded. "And ensure he drinks it."

"But it will not kill him?" I asked. I could not kill someone. Not even to save myself from marriage to a brute.

He narrowed his eyes at me. "I told you already. I am not going to start a war. And you'd do well not to question me further."

"I'm sorry, Cousin, it's just that—"

"*King*," he said with a sneer. "*King* Jeshua. Or *Your Highness*. Or even *sire*. Our familial relationship does not excuse you from the respect owed to me."

I swallowed my disdain and bowed my head. "Of course, Your Highness."

"This is not complicated, Faelyn." He walked up to me and held out the glass vial filled with the red elixir. "Pour this in his wine, be sure he drinks it, and come back here."

I took the vial, my fingers cold and stiff as I did so. "Understood, sire."

"Safe travels, Cousin."

I managed a nod, but my chin quivered as I turned and left the room, feeling more like a specter than ever before. Surely this wasn't real. Surely I was in some between-place where up was down and right was wrong, where the bit of safety I'd acquired was suddenly as elusive as smoke.

But no, this was all too real.

*A countryside road
Kingdom of Dalthia*

"Is this it?" I asked the young boy who had led me here.

I was now simply Fae.

Jeshua had put me and a maid named Henny into an unmarked carriage that had taken us into the neighboring kingdom of Valefraug and then all the way down to the border of Dalthia. If I had tried to cross from Tride into Dalthia, my presence would have been scrutinized. Tride and Dalthia had been at peace for decades, but some misunderstanding between King Jeshua and the king of Dalthia some years ago had strained relationships just enough that Tridians and Dalthians were wary of one another.

But if I acted the part of a citizen of Valefraug (or a Fraug, as they liked to call themselves), then my entry wouldn't be questioned, especially if I looked like a commoner. Morwen and Valefraug had also once been part of the same kingdom and thus had similar accents. One of the soldiers had given me a plausible story to tell anyone who asked, but other than that, I felt woefully unprepared.

We had arrived at an inn near the estate where William (Jeshua had declined to give me any name other than that) would be attending a house party held by Rylander Baylor and his wife at Baylor House.

It would be an odd assortment of couples, I was told, ranging in station from royalty to mere misters and misses, though I wasn't sure I believed it. People tended to stick to their own social stations.

Henny and I had left the coachman at the inn and asked a young boy to take us to Baylor House. We did not want to risk asking for directions from anyone at the inn. The less anyone knew about my movements, the better.

"Baylor House," the boy said. "Not as big as the manor house on the hill but fancy enough."

I looked down the lane he'd led us to, through the cathedral of trees lining the way, and studied the house that sat in the distance. I'd been imagining a dark and forbidding building. Instead it was mostly light-gray stone and not nearly as large as I'd been thinking.

"Thank you," I said to the boy as I pulled a coin from the pouch tied at my waist. He snatched it from my hand as soon as I held it out, then took off at a run.

"I sure hope he weren't lying," Henny said from where she stood at my side.

"I don't imagine he'd have reason to." I blew out a breath. "Now what?"

She shrugged. "That's up to you. But I was told to give you this once we'd found the place." She held out a missive, sealed with plain wax. My nostrils flared. I had no doubt it was from Jeshua and that he had left off his seal in order not to leave evidence of his involvement.

I snatched the letter from her and tore it open.

Dear Cousin,

You have arrived. Well done. Now that you are face to face with what must be done, I want to ensure that you are properly motivated. Three days should be enough time to fulfill your task, and to encourage prompt obedience, I have affixed a fine piece of sturdy chain around each of your family members' necks. A gift, as it were. Upon this fine piece of jewelry, I will add one iron weight for each additional day it takes you to complete your task.

My mouth went slack, my breathing shallowed, and I felt the blood drain from my face. He was going to torture my family.

This is meant to be an incentive, not a punishment. So I will take travel time into consideration. It will take you three days to arrive at your destination and three days to return. With three days to complete your task, that means I will not add the first weight until day ten. That means that if you take three days or less to accomplish your task, your family will not bear any additional burden. But if it takes you more than a week, the four added weights will make it difficult for your family members to even raise their heads.

Efficiency would be best.

I blinked back the tears that suddenly stung my eyes and didn't notice when the letter slipped from my fingers until Henny bent to pick it up. I had lost nearly a whole day. We were supposed to arrive last night, but a storm had delayed us in Valefraug and the coachman hadn't shared my urgency to arrive and thus hadn't pushed the horses.

Henny refolded it and looked up at me, her eyes not entirely devoid of feeling, but almost.

"Do you know what that note says?" I asked.

"Can't read, Highness," she said as she tucked it back into her apron.

"I'm a miss here."

"Course, miss."

I sniffed and looked away before turning back. "How much do you know about what I'm supposed to do?"

"I know enough. I know there's a traitor here and that the king sent you to handle things. I was to give you that message when we arrived. I'm to listen for rumors about someone named William."

"Do you know what I'm supposed to do to this traitor?"

"King Jeshua didn't give me any specifics. But I know he deserves what's coming to him."

"How can you know that?" How could anyone condone hurting someone when they knew nothing about them?

"Because the king said so, and I'm loyal to the king." She said it with such passion and conviction.

I'd been hoping to find a crack in Henny's loyalty, or the coachman's, but it was clear that Jeshua had chosen his servants well.

I took an unsteady breath. "And now that you've delivered that message, what are you to do?"

"Go back to the inn, I suppose. Good luck to you, miss." She turned and walked back down the road, leaving me to stare at the lane that led to Baylor House. William. My assignment.

An assignment that, if it took too long, would mean that my family was incapacitated by Jeshua's little torture devices. I supposed I was lucky he wasn't threatening to hang an entire millstone around their necks.

I started up the lane, having no plan other than to go to the servants' entrance and see if I could beg for a job. I would be terrible at it, of that I was certain. But so long as they didn't kick me out before I found out who William was...and gave him the elixir...I closed my eyes, trying not to think that far ahead. The unease about my assignment had only grown during my travels, but I still didn't have a choice, especially now that I knew about Jeshua's *incentive*. So I kept telling myself that Jeshua wasn't a dastardly villain. He wouldn't really send me to kill anyone. This was petty revenge, a way for him to get his power back; that was all.

That was all.

Or maybe just punishment for someone who had betrayed Tride and its king. Justifiable in every way. It would be better if I thought of it in that way. William was a traitor, and that was all I needed to know.

Halfway up the lane, I saw a path that led off into a wooded area and decided to take it. I needed to gather my courage, so I slipped into the trees and was thankfully greeted by a small pond.

Morwen was a kingdom of many waters. Lakes and streams, rivers and ponds abounded. Tride was not nearly as lush, and I'd missed the opportunity to dip into a body of water whenever I had a mind to.

I hurried to sit at the edge of the pond and pulled off my shoes before stripping off my stockings and slipping my feet into the water. The moment the cool water surrounded my feet, lapping at my ankles, I was immediately calmer.

The sun was still half an hour from setting, but this pond was surrounded by dense trees and lush vegetation, making the light dim and the air heavy with moisture and the sound of croaking frogs.

Perhaps there would be fireflies here. It was tempting to stay here and see if I could spot them, but that would only put off the inevitable. I had to do as the king asked me and give the elixir to William.

Just a few minutes. I would take a few minutes to build up my resolve here in the serenity of this small oasis, then I would get on with it. Resting my forearms on my knees, I stared into the water as it stilled around my feet, becoming a sleek surface that reflected my face back to me in the dusky light.

I looked heartsick. A perfect reflection, then, because that's exactly what I was.

Time slipped by, and I was there for more than just a few minutes, but the sun still peeked through the trees here and there when I pulled my feet from the water. I'd need to wait for them to dry before I put my stockings back on.

A sweeping, swishing sound of someone walking through lush foliage caught my ears, and I stilled, ducking down into the tall grass so that I was practically lying on my side.

Animal or human? I asked myself, focusing my eyes in the direction from which the sound came.

Human, I answered myself as a man came through the trees on the other side of the pond. He looked over the water and took a deep breath, seeming relaxed and in no hurry. Perhaps I was not the only one who found water calming. He looked down for several moments before bending and picking up a rock, then giving it a casual flip of his wrist and sending it skipping across the surface. The croaking of the frogs seemed to pause for just a few moments before resuming. He smiled softly, leaving me intrigued. Who was he, and what was he doing here?

His clothing made it obvious that he was of the upper class. Not a laborer, but a gentleman or perhaps even a lord. He must be one of the house party guests. He could even be William, though such a coincidence was too unbelievable to hope for. He wouldn't be the host. No host would abandon their guests to laze about by the pond. Perhaps I should stand and introduce myself, maybe even ask for an introduction to the lady of the house. Approaching an unknown man away from the eyes of society and with the dimming light seemed ill advised, but what other choice did I have? I didn't have time to wait on propriety. So I gathered my skirts and my courage and was in the process of convincing myself to stand and speak when a voice spoke from the trees.

"There you are."

My eyes shifted to the newcomer, a woman, petite and polished, stepping through the undergrowth, her hem raised to avoid getting dirty. I sank back into the grass.

The pond was only about the size of a large drawing room, thus any sound I made would carry easily over the water.

"Lady Gerty," the man greeted with a bow, though I noted how stiff he looked now compared to when he'd been alone. "What are you doing here?"

"Why, looking for you, of course," she said with a flirtatious tilt of her shoulders. "We were having such a lovely time and then you just disappeared. What brings you all the way out here?"

"The quiet," he answered in a polite but cool tone that suggested what he really meant by *quiet* was *solitude*.

Lady Gerty was oblivious. "It is lovely out here." Her eyes raked up and down his coat and breeches. "Romantic, even."

My eyes widened. This woman was not being subtle.

"Under the right circumstances, perhaps," the man said, turning his body away from her a little. His body language made it clear that he had no interest in either speaking or interacting with her.

I was relieved by that. I had no desire to witness a romantic liaison while hiding in the damp grass only a stone's throw away.

Lady Gerty did not take the hint; instead, she sauntered closer and wrapped her hands around his upper arms. "And what are the right circumstances?" she asked in a breathy whisper.

The man gently but firmly removed her hands from his arms. "Mutual interest, for one," he said and stepped back.

Lady Gerty's mood changed in a blink. Her eyes narrowed, her lips pursed, and her face went red.

"I'm certain you're being missed at the party," he said, pointing his chin in the direction of the house.

Her own chin lifted and she pulled her shoulders back. "I'm sure you're right. Heaven forbid someone come along and assume there was any sort of connection between the two of us." Her laugh was hollow. "That would be most embarrassing for me." She looked at him with disdain. "Especially when you are clearly not the man I thought you were."

His gaze was steady. "Happy to disappoint you, madam."

She spun in a huff and stomped back through the trees.

The moment she was out of sight, his head dropped forward and he let out something between a sigh and a growl. Then he shook his head and started to pace. Gone was the man at ease, relaxed and calm. Instead he shoved his hands through his dark hair, mumbling quietly to himself, his words incoherent. He pulled some sort of chain out of his pocket and rolled the piece of jewelry between his hands, the dim light glinting dully off the gold surface. I started to study him in earnest, wondering if it was only the awkward encounter with the flirtatious woman that had disrupted his peace so thoroughly. Did the piece of jewelry belong to someone he pined for? Did he plan to give it to someone? Was that someone the reason he had so soundly shut down the advances of the beautiful Lady Gerty?

As the minutes passed, his agitation waned and his pacing slowed. Hopefully he would be on his way soon. If he had been bothered by the approach of a fellow guest, he certainly wouldn't welcome my intrusion.

Eventually he stopped his pacing altogether and turned to face the pond, heaving a slow sigh as he studied the ripples made by water bugs and fish nipping at the surface.

He went to tuck the chain back into his pocket, but instead he fumbled it. He gasped and grabbed for it, but it tumbled into the water.

He stared at the water in horror. “No.” He dropped to his knees and plunged his arm into the pond, feeling around for several long moments before straightening and pulling off his coat. Then he leaned down again and reached into the water, submerging his entire arm up to and past his shoulder. “There,” I heard him mutter. “If I can just...no...blast!”

He pulled himself up and sat back on his heels, huffing as he placed his hands on his hips and seemed to contemplate the situation. Then he stood and started unbuttoning his vest.

Oh dear, was he going to...?

He stripped the vest off and bent to remove his shoes. One stocking came off and he reached for the other.

“Wait a moment,” I called out before he could go any further in disrobing.

“Gah!” He jerked in surprise and fell onto his backside, the second stocking still halfway on his foot. “What in blazes?” His eyes darted around until he spotted me across the pond. “You startled me.”

“I apologize,” I said as I sat up, no doubt a bit wide-eyed. Then I added a “sir,” remembering that I needed to be deferential instead of authoritative. I was no longer Princess Faelyn Lochridge of Morwen; I was Fae, a peasant Fraug. I was desperate, and alone, and in need of any friend I could find.

He narrowed his eyes, likely having difficulty seeing me in the dim light. “How long have you been sitting there?”

“Since before you arrived.”

He huffed, no doubt realizing I’d seen the awkward interaction with the brazen woman. “Oh good. So you were witness to all my idiocy.”

“I’m afraid so. Do you need help?” I asked, suddenly realizing that if I helped him, he might return the favor. “I imagine my clothing would recover much better from a dip in the pond than yours would.”

His eyes widened. “You would do that?”

I shrugged. “It seems important.”

“It is, and it seems to be stuck in a crevice. I was going to try to move the rock, but I worry about damaging it. Perhaps with your smaller hand...”

I stood and for one brief moment contemplated taking off my overdress, but then decided against it. Instead, I made the hasty decision to wade into the water fully clothed. I slipped into the water, trying to look composed as I made my way across the pond toward the man. When I was in the deepest part, with the water up to my waist, I drummed up my courage and my cunning and asked, “If I’m able to retrieve it for you, will you grant me a favor?”

“Of course, of course!” he agreed easily. “Anything you want. Please, it’s very dear to me.” He stuck his hand into the water, drenching his sleeve again. But just as before, his lips pinched in frustration and he gave up, climbing to his feet and shaking the water from his arm with a growl.

I would have laughed if I weren’t so terrified and nervous. He studied his hands, which drew my attention to them. They were large indeed. His whole frame was broad, and I could imagine him commanding the attention of any room he walked into. His hair was dark, looking black in the dim light.

The water was up to my thighs as I came nearly to the shore and swallowed my nerves. “What is it I’m looking for?” I asked, bracing myself as I sank down into the water. The shock of the cool water hitting my chest stole my breath for only a moment, and then I started feeling around with my hands.

“It’s a locket. Large, round, and gold.”

The backs of my fingers scraped against some rocks, and as I ran my hands over and around the stones, I found the crevice he was talking about. I stuck my hand inside, and even though it was far smaller than the gentleman's, I had to contort and wedge my fingers inside. "You're sure it's in this crevice?" I asked, looking up at him.

He nodded, still kneeling on the bank, looking anxious. "I felt it at the opening, but when I went to grab it, I only succeeded in pushing it further inside."

I wiggled my fingers more, ignoring the cold water that was starting to make me shiver. Finally, my fingertips brushed up against what felt like a chain. I slowed down, continuing to move carefully, and managed to hook the chain around the tip of my finger. Then I cautiously drew it out and lifted it out of the water.

His relief was palpable as he took it from my hand. "Thank you, miss!" He sat down and held the locket up, examining it as he turned it over in his hands, drying it with his fine linen shirt.

After moving to the bank, I tried to pull myself out of the water, but the bank was tall and steep, and my wet hands slipped in the grass.

"Pardon me," the man said as he hastily put the locket away and climbed to his feet. "How unforgivably rude of me. Let me help."

I grabbed on to both of his hands and he lifted me easily from the water. I wrung out my skirts, trying to ignore the propriety that had been bred into me my entire life. Never before would I have appeared this wet and disheveled in front of a man, but I told myself that I was not royalty now. I was a commoner, and I had to be more concerned with practicality than propriety.

I looked up at him, wondering how to get my favor. Wondering who he was and why he was here. He was clearly one of the house party guests. *Could he be William?* I wondered as he stooped to pick up his vest. That question had me cutting my eyes to his as my gut clenched with worry.

They were blue. His eyes were blue.

He gave me a vibrant smile while putting his vest back on. "May I have your name that I might thank you properly?"

"Fae," I answered, belatedly slipping into a curtsy. Then I reached down to wring some of the water from my skirts.

"Fae, you have my eternal gratitude." He sat down to pull on his boots. "I am Bram Mantock, and I am very pleased to make your acquaintance. You have done me a great service."

"Not at all, Mr. Mantock." So he wasn't William; that was good. Or was it? If he'd been William, I could have tried to give him the elixir now. "Do you live here?"

"No, I am attending a house party." His brow drew down as he pulled on his second boot. "And you? You don't work here?"

"No, I'm only passing by. The pond called to me and I could not resist."

One side of his mouth curled up and he climbed to his feet, his coat in hand. "I cannot blame you for that. Now, Fae. What favor might I grant you?"

I rubbed my thumb into the side of my finger as jittery nerves skittered over my body. Or maybe that was the cold. Either way, I shoved my apprehension aside and asked for what I wanted. "Invite me in as your guest."

He blinked and fell back a step. "I beg your pardon?"

Start negotiations high, my father always said. "I'd like to walk into this party on the arm of a gentleman. As you can imagine, I've never had that opportunity before. Escort me into the party, let me share a meal with you, and give me a room where I might sleep tonight." It was too much to ask. I knew that, but I hoped that if I asked

for a lot, he would at least concede to *some*. I needed to get inside that house, and if he could do that for me, I would be well on my way to finishing what King Jeshua demanded of me and being able to go home.

Mr. Mantock chuckled, but I could tell it was only because my demand was so outrageous. I was soaking wet, after all. Surely I was not serious.

I allowed myself a smile. "I am in jest, of course," I said, realizing that I had started with too much and he didn't know what to make of it.

This time his chuckle was one of relief. "That would cause quite the stir," he said, amused. Thank the stars I had been able to play it off as a joke.

Deciding on a different tactic, I looked down at my sopping, disheveled state and then back up at him. "I am wet and cold. If I could dry out by a fire and perhaps have a meal?"

He nodded thoughtfully.

But before he could say anything, I continued. "It's also quite late, so a place to rest for the night would be a great favor."

I didn't think it was too much to ask, but his face fell in an odd way. "Being seen with me will do neither of us any favors," he said carefully.

My hope faltered dangerously. "I'm well aware of my station and yours," I said, allowing my confusion to show. "But you indicated that this locket meant a great deal to you; therefore I ask a great deal in return. You promised me a favor."

He let out a sigh. "I'm sorry, miss. I can grant you a favor, but not that one."

"Why not?" I challenged.

He frowned. "I have a reputation," he said, fixing me with a heavy look. "One I earned. One *that woman*"—he gestured in the direction Lady Gerty had gone—"believes is still true. And while I'm not the prideful and selfish man I once was, that reputation still follows me. I would not wish for you to be caught up in that. Please believe me when I tell you that your situation will not be improved if I invite you into the house. It would only bring you down further." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a coin. "Here," he said as he tossed it to me. "This will be far more valuable to you, I am sure."

I caught the coin and looked down at it. It was a gold piece. If I truly had been a commoner, it would have been enough money to feed me for a month. But I didn't need money. I tried to tamp down my frustration. "This is most generous of you, sir. But you promised to grant me a favor, and the favor that I ask is to be invited inside."

He looked uncomfortable. "I never meant to go back on my word, but it's the best I can do." He turned away like he was going to leave me here.

"I have nowhere to go, sir," I said, my desperation leaking into my voice. I would not get a better chance than this. I must convince him to allow me into the house. "I am wet," I called after him. "Am I to leave here in the dead of night and catch my death because I was kind enough to retrieve your precious locket?" It was unkind, but I was desperate.

He paused in his retreat, and I watched his back as he ran a hand over his face. Then he sighed. "Of course not." He shook his head and turned back to me, his eyes assessing. "What brings you here anyway?"

I chuckled. "Finally thought about someone other than yourself?" Oh heavens, I hadn't meant to say that out loud! I sounded like a spoiled child. But I didn't know how to do this, and all my angst and fear was robbing me of my ability to be polite, as well as my ability to keep my thoughts to myself.

He blanched at my words, and I couldn't blame him.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I know I am being unforgivably rude, but..." I shrugged, gesturing around me at the gathering darkness. I was used to being in control during negotiations, but I'd always been in a position of power and authority before. Now I had neither.

Fortunately, my inept attempts at negotiation and my bumbling apology had the desired effect. "No, it's I who should apologize," he said. "You are right. I've shown a horrid lack of concern for your welfare."

His kindness made me feel terrible. "That isn't strictly true," I said quietly. "You seem to honestly want to protect my reputation, which shows a distinct lack of self-absorption."

He smiled only a little at that. "Please," he said, giving me his full attention. "Tell me what brings you here."

"Nothing too exciting. I am simply lost. The direction I received from the blacksmith was not as clear as I'd hoped."

"What was your destination?"

"A cousin of mine said she's found work for me at Springgate Manor."

He frowned. "Springgate? The Sprinns are not in residence now. They took their entire household to their seaside manor."

I forced myself to look worried. "They did?" Of course I knew they did. It was part of the story that Jeshua had provided for me with his spies' information.

"They won't return for more than a fortnight."

I looked down. "Oh dear..."

"Where are you traveling from?" he asked.

"Valefraug."

He smiled. "A Fraug, are you?"

I nodded, grateful that he responded so positively to the lies of my origin. "And proud to be one. I was loath to leave my homeland. Perhaps I shouldn't have."

"I am afraid you are quite a ways off from Springgate House, and since they are not there..." He chewed on his lip, no doubt deciding what to do with me. "I cannot offer you a bed as it is not my house," he stated with finality. "But I will do my best to find you a meal and some dry clothes."

I let my relief show, since someone in my supposed situation would be more than glad for the offer. But I also pushed for more. "What of your company?"

"What of it?"

"I realize having you escort me into a party is laughable, but still, having the company of a gentleman would be most intriguing." I could see his surprise, though he tried to hide it. "At least you could spend a few minutes with me as I eat." I held my breath, wondering if I was being too bold, but not knowing how else to accomplish my task if I did not convince someone to tell me more about the party and its guests.

The curve of his mouth was oddly sad. "You don't want my company."

I studied him, wondering if he really meant that and curious about why. "I think I do."

He let out a sigh and pulled his hand down his face. "Come along. I will procure you some dry clothing and a good meal one way or another."

I was fairly certain that one meal wouldn't give me enough time to *find* this William, much less convince him to drink the elixir. I needed more time. Perhaps once I was inside I could find a reason to stay or a way to sneak in later...anything.

After I'd retrieved my shoes from the other side of the pond, our walk to the house was quiet. I kept my mouth shut because I didn't want to give him any reason to change his mind. He didn't talk because...well, I assumed because he was annoyed that I'd refused to take no for an answer.

The sun had set and the way forward became more and more dim. Mr. Mantock had chosen a path through the trees that was less a path and more a...non-path. As such, my foot got caught in a thick tangle of vines and I would have fallen on my face if not for Mr. Mantock catching me.

"Did you hurt yourself?" he asked as he helped me get back on my feet.

"No. Thank you for your assistance," I said, then winced when I realized how prim and cultured my words sounded.

A commoner. I'm supposed to be a commoner.

"Good," he said, and kept walking.

I wasn't surprised when he led me around to the side door. We came into a corridor behind the main staircase, and after he closed the door behind us, he looked at me, at the way I huddled in my wet clothes with my hands clutched to my chest, and seemed to be at a loss for what to do next. It was almost endearing.

"Now," he said, rubbing his palms on his thighs. "For dry clothing, I suppose—"

"Bram?"

His head jerked up, panic flashing in his eyes, then dissipating when he saw the woman that was walking toward us. "Kinley, hello."

"You disappeared from our parlor games." She shifted her eyes over to me for just a moment. "And you've brought a dripping stranger into my house." Her brow quirked with curiosity. She was probably close to my age and dressed in fine clothing. Her mass of tight curls was twisted into submission and pinned against her head, but the way she carried herself had an ease that spoke of a lack of stuffiness. I immediately liked her. "Care to explain yourself?" she asked Bram.

"You know I don't like crowds."

She let out a small guffaw and gave him a teasing lift of her brow. "That is hardly a crowd, and that does not explain our wet guest."

"Well. I just went out to get some air, and clumsy fool that I am, I dropped something in the pond." He gestured toward me. "This young lady saw me struggling to retrieve it and heroically offered to go into the pond after it. I'm afraid she is in need of some dry clothing due to the service she rendered me."

"And so, it seems, do you," Kinley said with a pointed look at Mr. Mantock's soaked arm and the wet coat that was draped over it.

"Yes, indeed," he conceded. "Fae," he said to me, "this is Mrs. Kinley Baylor."

I dropped a curtsy that felt awkward. "A pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Baylor."

She bowed her head, smiling without reserve. "And you," she said before turning back to Mr. Mantock. "Well, Bram, I shall take care of your unwitting savior while you go take care of yourself."

Mr. Mantock bent, giving Mrs. Baylor a sincere bow. "Thank you. I am in your debt. I'm afraid I also promised the young lady a hot meal before she goes. I apologize for imposing on your hospitality."

Mrs. Baylor waved that aside. "Think nothing of it. You know I wouldn't begrudge such a thing."

Mr. Mantock gave her a smile that I would almost describe as tender. "Of course, Kinley."

"I shall help her find the kitchen as soon as she is no longer wearing half the pond." She turned to me. "Come along," she said, taking my arm in hers as if we were two good friends about to stroll through the garden. "Now, tell me your name again," she said as she led me toward the stairs.

"Fae, my lady."

"Very nice to meet you, Fae. But I'm not a lady," she said with an intriguing curve of her mouth. "Please call me Kinley. Welcome to my home." She gestured toward the stairs almost as though she couldn't believe she lived here. How odd.

"I am sorry to intrude, ma'am," I said, even though I could not actually be sorry since it was precisely what I wanted.

"I honestly don't mind. And you look about my size, so we should be able to find something in my wardrobe to fit you."

I blanched. "Something of yours?"

"Yes. I can't very well go rummaging through other people's belongings, now can I?" We reached the top of the stairs and she pushed through the first doors to our right.

I hesitated in the doorway, having had enough experience in the last months being barred from many spaces in the Tridian castle that I dared not enter so sacred a space as the bedchamber of the mistress of the house without her explicit invitation.

Kinley tossed open her wardrobe and started sorting dresses before she noticed my absence. When she did notice, she gave me a funny look and waved me in. "Come in, please. Help me choose."

I entered carefully, wanting to show her the respect she was due. It was moments like this when I realized how far I was from home. Not just physically but in every way. I used to be the one respected. I used to be the one with the privilege of showing those below me either gentle kindness and understanding or firm reprimand and correction.

Looking at Kinley from the side, I noticed that she seemed to have a distinct bump below the high waist of her gown.

"Are you—" I cut myself off. It would be impertinent for a commoner to ask the lady of the house such a thing.

But Kinley saw the direction of my gaze and just laughed. "Yes, I am."

I smiled, taken in by her unfiltered joy.

"It's our first." She gazed down at her belly as she ran a hand over it. "Rylan—my husband—and I are quite anxious to welcome him or her."

"That's wonderful, congratulations." It was odd to hear tears in my own voice. Why should such a thing make me emotional? I didn't want to examine it too hard, so instead I watched Kinley rifle through her wardrobe. The way she moved and did things for herself seemed strange for a genteel woman. The abundance of practical work dresses that hung alongside her more elaborate gowns also seemed contrary to her station.

"I'm certain a servant could help me," I said, not wanting to impose more.

"There's really no need for the lady of the house—"

She waved that aside. "I'm afraid I will never be good at acting the part of a gentlewoman, though I do my best when necessary. But everyone here is a friend and they all know my odd ways." She pulled out a dress, inspected it, and then put it back. "You see, I grew up a commoner, and it's barely been a year since Rylan and I married, so letting servants do things for me still feels strange."

My brow jumped in surprise. "You were a commoner?" That explained much.

She nodded as she continued to look through the wardrobe. "My brother is Sir Gavin, who married Princess Ariella."

"Oh." I knew the story well. Everyone knew of the odd princess who married a commoner. Jeshua had planned to wed Princess Ariella, even got her father, King Forrester, to agree to it. Jeshua had been petulant about her refusal for years after it happened.

Kinley smiled at my reaction. "Yes. *Oh*, indeed. When Gavin was raised in station, it put my whole family in an odd position, a strange in-between place. Then I married Rylan and things got stranger. I now regularly interact not only with Ella as my sister-in-law but with her sisters as well."

"You regularly dine with royalty?" How funny that she was a commoner raised to a noble position and I was a princess masquerading as a commoner.

Of course, there was a vast difference between her romance and my tragedy of being an unwilling weapon.

"Perhaps not regularly, but I'd been invited to enough gatherings over the last few years that I felt I really must return the gesture. Still, I'm nothing but a bundle of nerves. So you're the perfect distraction. Here, put this on," she said as she handed me a bundle of fabric and directed me behind a screen.

"Truly, Mrs. Baylor," I said as I worked to untie my wet laces. "I have no wish to keep you from your company. I'm certain I can find my way to the kitchen when I'm done."

"Nonsense. I'm enjoying the reprieve, and that dress laces up the back, so you've really no choice but to let me help. And I told you to call me Kinley."

I held up the dress that she'd handed me. She was right. I would need her help. Apparently she was determined to escort me to the kitchen, which meant I wouldn't have the opportunity to snoop on my own. I was a terrible spy.

I slowly peeled myself out of my clothing, realizing as I did so that I had become quite chilled. "Mr. Mantock mentioned a house party," I said, thinking I might get information from her.

"My very first."

"How many guests are here?" I inquired as I threw the dry chemise over my head and then reached for the wool stockings.

"Fourteen. Will you hand me your wet dress?"

I picked it up and was about to hand it over when I remembered the elixir was still in the pocket. My heart pounded when I realized just how close I'd come to giving myself up and giving away my key to freedom. I pried the vial from the damp folds of the pocket and clutched it to my chest with one hand while handing over the wet dress with the other. Then I carefully pulled the dry dress close to me and searched it for pockets, letting out a sigh of relief when I found one.

After throwing the dress over my head, I made sure the bottle was shoved deep into the pocket and that my necklace was hidden beneath the neckline of the dress. It might have been foolish to wear the royal crest of Morwen. It could give me away. On the other hand, I knew that if things went awry, proving my identity might be the only way to keep me from prison or get the help I needed. So I tucked it securely beneath my dress and then came out from behind the screen so that Kinley could help me with the laces.

Everything about this situation was strange.

I followed Kinley down two flights of stairs and to the back of the house where the kitchen was.

She pushed ahead of me into the lamplight of the kitchen and then stepped aside.

Mr. Mantock stood from the table where he'd been sitting and gave a short bow in Kinley's direction. "Thank you, Kinley."

"Of course. I'll leave you to it. I'm certain Cook will take care of you."

"Thank you so much, Kinley," I said.

"Anytime," she said with an easy smile. Then she winked at me (which I had no idea how to interpret) and left us there.

"Please sit," Mr. Mantock said, gesturing to the chair across from him.

My eyes darted over to the cook who worked quietly in the corner, humming to herself. Then I crossed to the table and took the seat, avoiding my inclination to sit prim and proper and instead letting myself slump a bit as I inspected the bowl in front of me. The stew was steaming hot and smelled wonderfully rich.

"You look warmer," he commented.

"Yes, thank you. Mrs. Baylor was very kind."

"She is that."

"How do you know her? She mentioned that she was not born to the noble class."

Surprise flashed across his face. "Did she? I'm surprised you had time to talk of such things."

"Did you meet her after she was married?"

He shook his head. "No, before."

My brow furrowed. If it was before her marriage, then she would have still been a commoner.

He noticed my look and let a little chuckle escape. "Believe it or not, she was actually a maid in my parents' household."

My face surely showed my shock.

"Her courtship with Rylander—Mr. Baylor—was unconventional, to say the least." His expression left me intrigued. He found amusement in the unconventionality of his friends' marriage and perhaps even envied it.

"So, did your friendship with them start while she worked in your home or after?" I asked, lifting a spoonful and blowing on it.

He thought for a moment. "I suppose it was during. Someone had warned her of my reputation, but we spoke one day and when I told her I had changed, she actually believed me." He looked as if that fact still baffled him. "Rylan, however, hated me at first." He grinned as he sat back and took a drink from his goblet.

"What of you and your family?"

I felt my face fall at the thought of my family but then did my best to arrange it in some sort of pleasant expression. "I have a younger sister. Much younger. There are nine years between us."

"So that would make her how old?"

I couldn't help but smile at his not-so-subtle attempt to learn my age. "She is twelve."

He seemed pleased by that answer, though I couldn't imagine why. I shoved the bite of stew into my mouth to cover my embarrassment.

"Any brothers?" he asked.

I shook my head, though it felt strange, especially when the familiar ache throbbed a little. "None." It was far too personal to tell him about Tennison. How he'd been four years older than me and destined for the throne. How he'd died at

only nineteen.

As Mr. Mantock looked at me, his brow suddenly lowered as though muddling through some puzzle. “You don’t speak like a commoner.”

I stopped chewing, startled by the realization that I might have already failed at acting like a believable peasant Fraug. I reminded myself to keep chewing, hoping that I’d have time enough before I swallowed to come up with a good story. Why would a commoner have such elevated speech? I finally came up with an idea and swallowed gratefully. “Yes,” I conceded. “Well, even the gentry occasionally fall on hard times.” I let a grimace cross my face, hoping that would discourage him from asking for more details.

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

I shrugged, smiling through the pain. I wasn’t gentry and I hadn’t been reduced to being a common worker, but I was a princess without a kingdom, reduced to living on the charity of others—and forced to be a spy. “So, tell me about this house party.”

He let out a long-suffering sigh. “This is Kinley’s first time hosting a house party. They’ve invited an odd assortment of friends that range from Kinley’s sister-in-law, Princess Ariella, to her best friend, Suzzanah, who is married to her brother Fynn. We’re a strange lot.”

“And why were you hiding out by the pond earlier?”

A small grimace crowded his face. “I’ve become good friends with Rylan and Kinley Baylor. They are fine people and I admire them both. But I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for my sister wanting to come.”

“Older or younger?”

“Younger and acts half her age.”

I rolled my eyes. “Brothers are always so anxious for their sisters to act like proper ladies, and yet they never demand the same decorum of themselves.”

“That’s quite the accusation.”

“Is it wrong?” I asked, remembering all too well the way that Tennison had teased me all those years growing up and trying to hide the dull grief that washed through me along with the memories.

To his credit, he thought for several moments before answering. “I don’t mind a lack of decorum. I mind her flights of fancy. She insists on falling in love with every man she sees, half of whom don’t even know she exists.”

I choked on my bite of food. “Surely you exaggerate,” I said after I’d cleared my throat.

“I wish I was. She even fancied herself in love with Rylander at one point. Of course, that was before he was married.”

I picked up my goblet. “Are there other single folk in attendance here? It would be a shame if she went an entire house party without falling for someone,” I said over the rim of my goblet. “And it’s bad form to fall for married men.” I took a sip, gratified when he grinned at my quip. I was having a difficult time thinking of him as Mr. Mantock. He seemed very much like simply Bram in these moments.

“Yes, there are a few unattached people in attendance. Although Lord Thistleby is the only single man other than myself, so she’ll no doubt be planning her wedding to him within a few days.”

“Do you only have the one sister?” I asked, hoping he would stay and talk so that we could build a rapport.

“One sister and one brother.”

“And are your parents still living?”

“They are, and both are in good health. What about you?”

How to answer honestly? “My parents’ health is...precarious.”

His face seemed to soften as he said, “I’m very sorry to hear that.” He looked as though he wished to say more, but then the door opened and we both turned to see the cook leaving. Bram pulled himself straight and stood up. “Well, I should—”

“What did you mean before?” I asked, desperate to keep him here.

“You’ll have to be more specific. We’ve been talking for some time.”

“You said you had a reputation.”

I half expected him to break eye contact or lean away from me, but he didn’t. His gaze intensified as he sat back down, like he was weighing what I asked with how long we’d known each other and trying to determine the consequences of my knowing. Then he just started talking. “I didn’t used to like myself much. And because of that, I didn’t really care for anyone else either.”

I was surprised not only by his bluntness but by the lack of self-consciousness.

“I mistreated people,” he admitted. “I used them, and I let them use me in return.”

I studied him, trying to see the sort of person he described, but it wasn’t there.

“But not anymore?” I asked, because clearly something had changed.

He smiled and sat back. “No, not anymore,” he confirmed, though his eyes seemed to hold appreciation when he looked at me. Perhaps he was still a bit of a scoundrel after all. And if that were the case...could I use that?

It was something to consider, certainly. For several minutes I focused on eating, giving myself time to think while playing the part of a hungry commoner.

I wiped my mouth, happy that I had remembered not to dab, and looked up at him.

“Feeling better?” he asked.

“Yes, thank you.” I said, then leaned forward and reached out a hand, hoping to capitalize on the tenuous bond we had formed. If I showed interest, he might be more...malleable. “Though I’d feel better with a warm bed and a roof over my head.”

He looked at me, his gaze steady and wise. “I can’t offer you shelter here,” he finally said.

My whole body drooped in disappointment. We had confided in one another. He had trusted me with things. Why could he not trust me to sleep in the same very large house that he slept in? “Mr. Mantock, I—” I struggled for words. “Where do you expect me to go?” I asked, wondering if he would really be so cruel as to toss a desperate woman out into the night, especially when I felt as though he and I had made a genuine connection with one another.

“I have given you all I can. It’s better this way, Fae.”

I looked away and sucked my cheeks in, trying to weigh my words before I said them and only half succeeding. “I’m so tired of men telling me they know what’s best for me.” I picked up my goblet and drained it in one large gulp, then set it down and stood, turning my back on him. I knew I was being unfair to him. He wasn’t O’Therion, and he wasn’t Jeshua.

But I *needed* this.

I turned back, staring at him, letting him see my desperation and resisting the urge to demand that he let me stay. His calm determination was maddening, even though in any other scenario I’d probably admire it.

Then his calm facade broke. He sighed and looked away. “Don’t look at me like that, Fae.”

“Like what?” I asked, not having to fake the tears welling in my eyes. “Like I have nothing and no one and nowhere to go?”

He stood and crossed to me, surprising me when he took my hands in his. “I *am* sorry.”

And he was. I could tell that he had some sort of care and concern for me. If I could just convince him to help me!

I had to be more clever. *What would Jeshua have me do?* Stars and lightning, what a wretched thought. But it gave me an idea. Jeshua thrived on manipulation.

“I should return to the party.” He started to drop my hands.

“Wait,” I said, tightening my grip. I couldn’t let him leave. I couldn’t let him kick me out. I needed him to get me farther into the house. I had to find William.

He looked at me. “Yes?”

“I—” What could I say? How could I make him stay? His eyes dipped to the clothing that Kinley had given me and that appreciation, that interest I’d seen before, was still there.

He forced his gaze back to mine.

What had he said? He’d used people and let them use him. Was he used to women throwing themselves at him? Lady Gerty had done just that, even though he’d treated her with nothing but coldness.

He was not cold toward me. If I were to...convince him that I wanted to spend more time with him...

We’d been dancing on the edge of flirtation already, and if he cared about me, then wouldn’t he want to help me? Perhaps he just needed to know I cared in return. If I showed more interest, I could convince him to let me stay. I’d been kissed on a few occasions by daring young noblemen. I could offer him a kiss if it meant getting closer to William—couldn’t I? I might even enjoy it.

I swallowed and moved closer to him. “I haven’t thanked you properly yet.”

He looked confused. “That’s not necessary,” he said, a frown marring his face even as his eyes dipped to my mouth.

“I think it is.” I summoned all my courage for that moment and dropped one of his hands so that I could reach up and rest my fingers on his chest. I looked up into his face, making my mouth soft and (hopefully) inviting despite the fact that I was wildly uncomfortable and a little terrified, hoping I looked alluring but not wanton.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Thanking you,” I said, even though my voice shook. Even though I was sure that this abrupt change in tactic seemed odd and maybe even suspicious. But I couldn’t think of anything else to try.

He narrowed his eyes and dropped my other hand. For a moment, I feared he’d scoff and turn away, but then he raised one hand and rested it on the side of my neck, his thumb caressing my throat and making my pulse jump.

What was I doing? This was madness. But if it worked?

He leaned in, but instead of his head coming down to kiss me, his other hand rested on my waist and he gently pushed me backward, walking with me, keeping his eyes fixed on mine and his body in close proximity until my back bumped softly against a wall.

A gasp escaped me. This seemed to be working. I wished it wouldn’t. Yes, he seemed decent enough, but I didn’t actually *know* him. What if he wasn’t satisfied with only a kiss? What if this was the stupidest thing I could have possibly done?

It didn’t matter at this point. If I needed to fight him off, I would. I would scream and kick. But if he would just take the kiss, if he would invite me in, if I could convince him to show me more of the house or—something.

Oh, this was *such* a terrible plan—but it was the only one I had.

He lowered his head toward mine, his mouth edging ever closer. My breathing sped up and I closed my eyes.

But then he shifted. Instead of pressing his lips to mine, he brought them to my ear and whispered, "Whatever game you're playing, I won't be part of it," before pushing away abruptly. He turned his back on me but only retreated a few steps. He shoved both hands into his hair, looking almost as discomfited as I was.

I leaned against the wall, my legs weak and my pulse thrumming—relieved and frustrated and humiliated. "It's not a game," I finally said.

"Of course it is," he tossed over his shoulder, then headed toward the door. He was going to leave.

"Please," I begged. "Please. I just need...a place to stay. Just for the night, please."

He let out a gusty sigh and then turned to face me. "I know you must think me unfeeling for turning you away, but the things that I've done... People's lives have been ruined by my actions, and it would be cruel of me to subject you to such a thing." He backed away two more steps. "I wish you the best of luck," he said before abruptly turning and leaving the kitchen.

I stood alone there, wondering what to do next. I felt awful for trying to manipulate him in such a way, but I was also desperate to find some way, *any* way, to do what I needed in order to free my family.

Then I realized the gift this was. The cook was gone, and Bram had left me alone. With no one here, there was nothing stopping me from slipping into the house to find more information, or maybe just find a place to hide for the night, or convince Kinley that Bram wished me to stay?

I bunched the fabric of my borrowed skirt in my hands as nerves coursed through me, then I loosened my grip and headed for the door that led to the rest of the house.

But before I reached it, it swung open and a man, who was no doubt the butler, looked me over with a hint of suspicion in his eyes before stepping back and sweeping his hand through the door. "I will see you out, miss."

So much for seizing the opportunity.

I followed the butler silently through the house, once in a while hearing a loud word or a ring of laughter floating down from where the house party guests were no doubt gathered.

The butler opened the front door for me and gave the faintest of bows. "The inn lies on the main road if you head west."

I nodded mutely and left.

I hurried back to the inn, the cool night making me nervous as it seeped into my skin. Being so alone was foreign to me. There'd always been servants or guards or family or noblemen. I folded my arms over my chest as some sort of useless protective barrier, dipped my head, and walked on, the small rocks of the dirt road crunching under my sturdy shoes. Shoes that were so different from the soft-soled slippers that I usually wore.

The inn was already in sight when I realized my blunder. I was wearing Kinley's clothes, and my own were left at her house. My foolishness must have been limitless. I could have insisted that I needed to return them, or asked where my own clothing was, or a number of other things that would have prolonged my stay.

Well, there was nothing for it. At least I would have that as an excuse to return tomorrow.

I made it back to the inn, climbed the back stairs without anyone seeing me, and knocked softly on the door of the room that Henny was staying in.

I heard a shuffling inside and then the door swung open. Henny looked unconcerned and unsurprised. She just stood back and let me come in. She shut the door, and as I sank into a chair, she asked, "Did you get it done?"

"No," I snapped.

"Very good, miss. You can try again tomorrow." She dipped a curtsy and walked away.

At least she'd finally remembered to call me miss. The last thing I needed was for those here at the inn to discover our charade. I hung my head in my hands, too overwrought to do anything else. I needed to sleep so that I could think clearly in the morning, because Henny was right. Tomorrow I would try again.

I would simply return, knock on the door of Baylor House, and ask to speak with Kinley. I would explain about the dresses and then...what? I was starting to regret telling them that I'd been on my way to work at Springgate. If I'd just asked for work, I might have gotten somewhere. Of course, claiming that while idly sitting by a pond would have been strange. And it would be odd for anyone to show up at a fancy house looking for work without any references.

I lightly pounded my fist against my forehead, tired and frustrated and so, so angry. The corners of my mouth pulled tightly down and a few tears suddenly squeezed from my burning eyes, but I forced a few deep breaths and stopped myself before I could sink any further into my self-pity.

I pulled the glass vial from my pocket and cradled it in my hands. How could something so small tear my life apart? How could it control me so fully? I squeezed it, fantasizing about what it would feel like to have the glass break in my hands. I wanted nothing more than to hurl it into the fire, but I couldn't. My family's well-being depended on this horrid vial. So I released my grip and put it back in my pocket before readying for bed.

I lay down with my eyes wide open, trying to imagine how I could possibly gain entrance to Baylor House again.

By morning, I'd had only a little sleep, but at least I had a plan. I would go back to Baylor House, return Kinley's clothing, and beg her help. I would tell her about the Sprinns not being in residence and ask if I could work for her temporarily.

I went out to the stables first thing, my gut churning and unable to stomach the idea of eating. The horses from Jeshua's stables were in two stalls, side by side. I had made friends with them during the journey. My parents were both horse mad

and had taught my sister and me not only to ride but to care for the horses ourselves. Sandy was kind enough to dip his head so that I could rest my forehead against his. "Hello, boy," I said, and let out a sigh through my nose. "What am I going to do?" I murmured, then pulled back so that I could stroke around his eyes and down to his nose. "After everything that happened"—I took a shaky breath—"I just never expected things to get worse." I pinched my lips and swallowed.

Sandy nipped at the front of my skirt and tugged on it for a moment. "Yes, I'd prefer to run away with you as well, but that's not really an option, is it?"

"Did you sleep in the stables?"

I spun around, startled by the man's voice and even more startled when I realized it was Bram.

Blast, I'd just been speaking out loud to the horse. Had I said anything that could give me away?

"I didn't mean to frighten you," he said as he slowly stepped forward.

I pulled my hand away from my heart and swallowed. "Not to worry," I said, going over what I'd told Sandy in my head and determining that I probably hadn't revealed my identity or purpose.

"Did you sleep here?" he asked again, concern written all over his face.

I turned away, giving myself time to think. He thought I'd slept in the stables. That could work to my advantage. If he truly believed I was desperate, maybe he'd be willing to help me. I glanced over at him but didn't hold his gaze. Desperation and humility, that's what I needed to portray. "My options were limited. Though I do not think the innkeeper would allow it again," I added, hoping that would make him more inclined to offer me help.

"I'm sorry it came to that."

I gave a little shrug. "I was well enough."

He stepped forward again, stopping only a few paces to my left. "I made you a promise," he said.

I allowed myself to look at him, noting the way his shoulders pulled back, reluctant but determined. "And?" I prompted, trying not to let my hope run away.

"And yes, it was made in haste and without me giving it the proper thought, but it was a promise, and I intend to keep it."

My hands stilled and my brow jumped. "You do?"

"Yes. I promised you a favor, whatever you asked. So I am offering you a place to sleep at Baylor House."

I should have accepted with humility, like I had planned, but my awful pride reared up at the way he forced himself to make the offer, and before I could stop my tongue, I said, "With great reluctance, it seems." I winced, horrified that I'd said such a thing and hating that this situation was turning me into someone I didn't like. Why could I not just *keep my mouth shut*? I smiled in an attempt to soften my words. "I know you didn't want to help me."

"It's not that," he said with surprising sincerity. "I did want to help you."

I blinked, shocked that he would let my rudeness pass without comment. "Then, what is it?" I asked, truly curious.

He looked at me as though I confused him. "Most young ladies would appreciate a man who wanted to protect their reputation."

I rolled my eyes. And the moment I did it, I knew by the look on his face that it was a mistake, so I pinched my lips together and looked away, feeling the chastisement deeply because I knew I deserved it.

"You believe that has no bearing on this situation?" he asked.

I went back to stroking the horse. How could I be honest and yet still work the situation in my favor? *Think, Faelyn, take time to think before opening your mouth, for once.* “I’ve just...I’ve been around you enough to know that any reputation you used to have should have no bearing on what happens now and is highly unlikely to affect my own. You are clearly not...” I floundered for the words. A philanderer? A rake? “What you used to be.”

He seemed to think on that for several moments, and I stayed silent, hoping to go back to the fact that he’d offered me a place to stay so that I could accept the offer and get back to Baylor House as soon as possible.

“And yet...you tried to kiss me.”

My cheeks blazed and I turned away. Of course he would remind me of that desperate misstep. “That was foolish of me, I admit.” I stroked Sandy’s cheeks, hoping the massive horse would ground me and keep me from sinking into the dirt with shame.

“Why did you do it?” he asked quietly from behind me. “Was it because you thought it’s what I...required? Or expected?”

I viciously shook my head. “I’m sorry if that’s what you thought.” I was, I truly was. I had no wish to insult this man. This good man who had come to an inn to make sure I had fared well through the night. “That’s not...” Except that it was what I’d thought. In my desperation I’d almost hoped that he was unreformed and would be willing to play my ridiculous, flirtatious game.

“All right,” he said. “Then, why?”

I shrugged. “Loneliness, I suppose.” It was a pathetic lie, and I regretted it almost instantly, but any other excuse made me seem like a tease or a manipulator. Which I had been... Saints, this was a mess.

His head tilted as he studied me. “Is that all?”

I could have said a simple yes, but that would have been adding to the lie. I closed my eyes, hating this situation more and more.

No. No, I didn’t want to add to the lie, not unless it was necessary.

So I took a breath and decided on the truth. “No,” I confessed, suddenly not needing to feign my deep humility. I forced myself to look at him as I said, “I was trying to manipulate you.”

Oddly enough, he smiled a little as he studied my face. “I thought as much.”

“I’m really sorry for that.” I looked down, truly ashamed. “I just...I was desperate and I couldn’t think of any other way.” I waited, hoping he wouldn’t turn and leave immediately.

The silence felt interminable, but eventually he said, “I appreciate the honesty.”

“I realize how insulting it must have been, and I didn’t—”

“Think no more of it.”

My brow lifted in surprise. “Really?”

He nodded.

“So then...”

“I intend to keep my promise. Will you return to Baylor House with me?”

“Yes, thank you,” I said, unable to hold in the gusty sigh of relief that escaped.

“Besides,” he said, seeming to shift into a lighter mood. “Kinley informed me that I was being an idiot, and I’d trust her instincts over mine on any day, so...”

I couldn’t help but smile at that self-deprecating assertion.

“She also said that even if you do not accept our offer, she needed to return your dress to you.” He finally removed his hands from behind his back and held out a package wrapped in paper.

“Oh, of course. I was planning to return Kinley’s dress to her today regardless,” I said, looking down at the serviceable but much nicer work dress that I wore.

But Bram shook his head. “She said you are welcome to keep the one you borrowed as her gift to you.”

I almost choked on my guilt but managed to swallow it down. “She should not be so kind to me.”

He shrugged. “In my experience, kindness rarely goes wrong.”

Well then, this was one of those rare occasions. Being kind to me would not be good for Kinley or for Bram.

“Well,” I said before anything else could distract us from the topic. “I happily accept your offer. I would be much obliged to spend a night at Baylor House, and I will do my best to stay out of the way.”

His smile was lopsided. “I’m afraid Kinley might have other plans for you. You seem to have left an impression on her, and I get the feeling she’d like to get to know you more.”

I should have been flattered, and under any other circumstances, I would have been, but if the people at this house party found me interesting, it would be very difficult to get William to drink the elixir.

“Do you have any belongings that...” He drifted off, likely trying not to draw attention to just how destitute I appeared.

“Yes, I—” He thought I’d slept in the stables. I couldn’t say they were in my room. “I left them in the kitchen with the cook. I’ll go fetch them.” I hurried off, my brisk walk turning to a run once I was out of sight. I climbed the stairs and found the room unlocked, so I pushed through and gathered my few belongings into the cloth sack I’d been using and bundled it into my arms.

It wasn’t until I was leaving that I realized Henny wasn’t there. I didn’t see her when I stuck my head into the dining area either. Oh well, hopefully she’d figure it out when I disappeared.

I hurried back outside and took a moment to catch my breath so I wouldn’t seem frantic as I joined Bram in the yard. I stepped around the corner and was horrified to see the innkeeper having a conversation with Bram, who had his back to me. Oh, this could be very, very bad. As I got closer, I heard Bram say, “It was kind of you to allow the young lady to stay here.” He gestured vaguely toward the stables.

The man looked confused, probably wondering how allowing a paying customer to stay was considered kindness. “I suppose.” He looked over Bram with suspicion.

I stepped up quickly. “Thank you for the accommodations, good sir.” I dipped a curtsy, straining for that air of humility that came so unnaturally to me. “If you could tell Miss Henny that I have found other accommodations for this evening, I’d be much obliged. Thank you so much,” I said while walking away, hoping that Bram would follow.

I relaxed my shoulders when the innkeeper did not call after me to clarify what I meant.

“Henny?” Bram asked.

“A young lady who was kind enough to speak with me last night when she brought her horse in to be stabled.” Even as I spoke it, I knew the lie didn’t quite make sense, but that’s what came of constantly having to come up with lies.

I kept my gaze ahead so that I wouldn’t have to see his skepticism.

“My horse is here,” he said a moment later, and I was forced to face him and his large stallion.

“Oh.” He’d come here on a horse. Of course he had. Well-polished nobility did not go walking country roads for the fun of it. He’d ridden here, so I was certain

he'd want to ride back to Baylor House, but when I looked around, the only other horse standing around had its own rider. A footman, by the looks of him.

"Here," Bram said, holding his hand out to take my bundle of belongings. I handed them over and he stowed them in a saddlebag.

I was about to suggest that he could ride ahead and I'd walk and meet him there, but he swung up into his saddle with such ease and confidence that for just a moment, I forgot what I was going to say.

Then he reached a hand down to me.

"If you grab my hand and step onto my boot, I can pull you up behind me."

"Oh, yes, of course," I stammered and awkwardly took his hand.

"Unless you'd prefer to ride with the footman?"

Ah, so the footman had accompanied him. No doubt to protect my reputation. "This is fine," I assured him. I ignored my own inward cringing at the impropriety of hiking up the hem of my skirt so that I could mount a horse astride and did it anyway.

"Ready?" he asked when I'd managed to get my foot wedged on top of his.

I nodded and tensed my arm as he pulled me up.

It was awkward, and I nearly fell back, but I managed to heave my other leg over the rump of the horse and seat myself behind him. I'd been around horses a great deal, but I'd always ridden sidesaddle and had never been heaved onto the back of one by a near stranger.

As I tried to untwist and adjust my skirts, he patiently waited, then said, "I'm sorry I didn't have the forethought to bring another mount."

"Not to worry," I said, because I couldn't imagine someone of my supposed circumstances complaining about not having their very own horse to ride.

"Ready?" he asked when I'd stopped fidgeting.

"Yes, thank you."

He heeled the horse into an easy walk, and we headed down the road toward the rising sun, the footman following at a distance.

The slow ride back to the Baylor estate gave me ample time to stare at Bram's back and wonder what kind of a man he was. Was he the fussy gentleman, worried about ruining reputations? Or was he the self-deprecating man, willing to sit with a common girl and share his troubles?

"Can I ask you something?" I said after the silence and my own curiosity made it impossible to stay silent.

"Of course."

"What changed?"

"I told you, I want to keep my promise."

"No, not that. What you were saying last night about how you used to mistreat people. Something must have changed. What was it?"

We passed through the cool shade of a tree and out again before he answered. "I was out drinking with an older gentleman I'd befriended. I can't remember why, but I didn't drink as much as I normally did. I remained more clearheaded than usual, but my friend got louder and more boisterous than I'd ever seen him. He'd never been so out of his head before, but at some point, he stopped laughing and became deeply reflective and serious, morose, even. And then he started to tell me what he really thought of himself." He turned his head so I could see his profile, and his mouth was twisted to the side. "He told me about things he had done, lies he'd told, friends he'd betrayed. A man who was usually carefree and merry was reduced to crying over regrets that cut him so deeply, he couldn't even speak of them. And I knew with perfect clarity that that would be me if I kept living the way I had been."

“Because of the drink?”

He shook his head. “Overindulging wasn’t nearly so difficult to stop. It was the self-loathing that was the real problem. The more I loathed myself, the more I acted badly. And the more I acted badly, the more I hated myself.”

“Your friend made you want to change.”

He nodded. “Seeing him, I knew I would waste years on empty pleasure and pointless pursuits, and at the end of it, I’d hate myself and have no one to love. I didn’t want to end up a gray-haired old man who had lost count of the number of lives he’d ruined.”

I wanted to say something, but...what could I say to that? His story was remarkable.

“I suppose, in my zeal to protect others from the person I used to be, I’ve become a bit hardheaded.”

“I’m surprised you came to find me,” I admitted.

“Yes, well. I’d made a promise, and Kinley—”

“Those don’t seem like good enough reasons,” I interrupted, and then wanted to slap myself for my inability to keep my mouth shut. “I mean—I’m very grateful you did, but you were quite firm in your decision to part ways, so your change of mind seems...improbable.” Especially after my disastrous attempt at a kiss combined with what he’d just revealed of himself.

He was silent for several moments, but his body hadn’t tensed when I asked the question, so I had to guess that he was just thinking. Maybe he didn’t understand it either. Maybe.

“I enjoyed our conversation yesterday.”

“Oh?”

“This house party is supposed to be easy and enjoyable, yet the most enjoyment I’ve had was sitting in the kitchen with you.”

“Oh.” What was I supposed to make of that? Yes, I’d felt a connection with him, but I’d assumed that connection was born of a desperation to have someone who could give me the access that I needed. But if I thought about it...yes, I’d enjoyed eating with Bram last night. It had been comfortable and easy. Right up until I’d flirted and tried to get him to kiss me.

Saints, I was grateful he couldn’t see the way my face flamed.

He turned onto the lane that led to Baylor House and glanced over his shoulder. “You’re being awfully quiet.”

“I...don’t know what to say.”

He rolled his shoulder as though uncomfortable. “I didn’t mean to embarrass you or—”

“It’s not that, I’m just...unaccustomed to anyone being so forthright.” At least not in personal matters. Advisors giving reports were forthright, but gentlemen in social situations—no.

“*You* are forthright,” he pointed out.

I let out a startled chuckle. “Yes, I am.”

“I used to be good at dancing around the truth, telling people what they needed to hear in order to get what I wanted. I’ve worked to change that.”

What a mess. He wanted to be forthright in order to not manipulate people, and here I was...manipulating him. “That’s admirable,” I managed to respond. “Though being forthright with me seems like a waste of time. I’ll be gone soon enough, after all.”

He looked over his shoulder and I caught his grin. “See? You are just as forthright as I am.”

If only he knew the dark secrets I kept hidden.

"You're interesting, Fae. A puzzle I can't figure out."

I let out a little guffaw. *Interesting*, he'd called me. He had no idea.

He tried to catch my eye, but I looked away. "You don't think you're interesting?" he asked.

"I think..." How could I be honest and dissuade him at the same time? "I think you'd be unhappy with what you discover."

"Uncertainty. That's not something I expected from you."

I couldn't respond, not without revealing too much. Let him think what he would.

When we arrived at the house, he slid to the ground and then carefully helped me from the horse. When he stepped back, I saw his hand go to the pocket of his vest. Was that where he kept the locket that he prized so highly?

After Bram had taken my bundle of belongings from the saddlebag and given it to me, the footman took the reins of the horse and led it away. However, Bram continued to look at me, seeming to hesitate in stepping away, until there was a commotion from the stables.

"Ho there!"

We turned to see the footman who was leading Bram's horse back up to make room for another horse and rider coming out of the stables.

"So sorry!" shouted the elegant woman who sat atop a spirited stallion as she skillfully directed her mount out of the way, her face flushed with excitement and a broad smile on her face.

Another horse exited the stables, this one led by a man with curly dark hair and a torso that spoke of hard labor. "Always in such a hurry," he said, shaking his head, though his mouth was curved in a smile.

"We have limited time here, Gavin," the woman declared in a teasing tone as her horse pranced beneath her. "Our children are being tended by others, and I am determined to ride every morning if I can manage it." Her face was so bright with joy that I was certain she meant every word.

"And every afternoon if you had your choice," Gavin said as he swung up into the saddle of his horse. He didn't look nearly as comfortable as the woman did.

The woman laughed easily.

Bram leaned down to murmur helpfully, "That is Princess Ariella and her husband, Sir Gavin."

It was then that the princess seemed to notice us. "Hello, Bram, is that your missing maiden?"

I blushed, though I wasn't sure why.

"I'm fairly certain she doesn't belong to me," Bram said ruefully, "but this is Fae, the helpful young woman I went to find."

"I'm glad you found her," Ariella said even as her horse circled beneath her and she had to turn to keep us in sight. "And it's a pleasure to meet you, Fae."

"The pleasure is all mine, Your Highness," I said, sinking into a curtsy.

She turned to her husband. "Do you need a head start?"

He rolled his eyes with a smile. "Just go. Your horse is as anxious as you are."

That seemed to be all the permission she needed. She heeled her horse and leaned low over its neck as it tore down the lane.

Gavin coughed dramatically on the dust she'd kicked up. "Enjoy your stay, Miss Fae." He turned his eyes to Bram. "I'd best chase after my wife."

Bram chuckled. "That's sound advice, whether or not she's on a horse."

Sir Gavin gave a farewell and kicked his horse into a much more sedate gallop than his wife had.

Once they were gone, Bram became introspective, saying nothing at all as he gestured toward the kitchen door. I wondered if this was the last we would have the chance to speak. Perhaps that was for the best.

6

The warm chatter of the kitchen was a comfort as we entered.

Bram handed over my belongings. "I'll send Kinley down so that the two of you can make arrangements" was all that he said before excusing himself.

"Thank you, Mr. Mantock," I called after him. I truly was grateful that he had come after me and invited me back.

He gave me a small smile and left the kitchen.

I looked around and noticed the cook stirring something in a large wooden bowl, watching me with a slight curl of her mouth and sharp eyes. "Back again, are you?"

I couldn't read her face. Was she disapproving? Curious? Suspicious?

"Yes. Can I do anything to help you?" I offered, hoping to accumulate some goodwill.

She shook her head. "Things are well in hand. I'll wait for Mrs. Baylor to decide what to do with you."

I nodded and turned my gaze away so that she could go about her work without me gawking. As I looked around the area, I noticed the lineup of trays along one counter, each with scones and a tea service arranged on it. "Are these going up to the guests?" I asked.

The cook nodded. "Haven't ever cooked for so many people before. I always keep them in the same order so everything is sure to go where it belongs." She pointed to the tray on the far left. "Sir William, Her Highness, Sir Gavin..." She continued to rattle off the names of guests, but I was stuck staring at that first tray. She'd said Sir William.

"...then Mr. Mantock, Miss Mantock, the Jessops, and the Amaros." She placed her hand on her hip and gave a satisfied little sigh and a nod of her head before turning back to her work.

While it was impressive that she was keeping it all straight, the only name I was concerned with was William.

Everyone else was of no consequence. She had said the tray to the far left belonged to him, and that was all I needed to know. I crossed over to it, trying to seem like I was only wandering, while carefully retrieving the elixir from my pocket. I glanced over my shoulder and saw that the cook was busily beating eggs, so I carefully uncorked the bottle and lifted the lid from the teapot.

It was over. This could all be over very soon.

But then I noticed the second cup. There were two cups and saucers, two plates, two everything.

I was supposed to administer this substance to William, not anyone else. And while I'd contorted my mind and my morals enough to accept that William had been declared a traitor to Tride, and any punishment administered by the king would be just according to the law, I couldn't countenance hurting an innocent. It was hard enough having to wonder if Sir William was in fact a traitor when I knew that King Jeshua might be reacting due to jealousy or petty vengeance. I'd had to accept that, in the end, King Jeshua's word was law. But hurting anyone else was out of the question.

Biting down to prevent a frustrated growl, I replaced the teapot's lid and corked the vial. I would have to take my opportunity another time when I was certain he would be the only one drinking the elixir.

As I moved to put it back into my pocket, the door creaked open and I jumped, swinging around to see Kinley breezing through the doorway, a kerchief the only thing keeping her riot of curls under control.

“Good morning, Fae,” she said with a smile as bright as the bundle of flowers in her hands.

I cleared my throat as my heart pounded in my chest. “Morning, Kinley,” I managed.

She must have interpreted my guilty face as shock at seeing her in the kitchen. “I know, I know,” she said as she set the flowers down on one of the counters. “I’m very strange for not letting my housekeeper do all of this, but I’ve never hosted a house party before, and I’m—” She took in a deep breath through her nose and I noticed the way her fingers tapped against the side of her leg.

“Nervous?” I suggested as I tried to wrestle my own nerves into submission.

“Very,” she blurted. “Surely you can imagine how nerve-racking it would be to rise up in station and have everyone looking at you, waiting for you to fail?”

Her candid vulnerability gave me the distraction I needed to get over nearly being caught. “I don’t get the feeling that anyone here is waiting for you to fail.”

She waved that aside. “No, of course not, but what about everyone who isn’t here? What about all those who are gossiping behind my back, waiting for me to humiliate my husband?”

My face was all sympathy. She was in a tough position.

“See, you’d be just as terrified.” She began cutting and arranging the flowers.

“Actually, you and I are opposites,” I told her. I’d already told Bram that I had been born into the genteel class. “I was not always of such low station.”

Her eyebrows jumped in surprise. “I’m so sorry. What happened?”

“Oh,” I sighed, wondering how to word it truthfully. “The unkindness and greed of others wreaked havoc on my family’s life. Upended it entirely.”

“Is there no chance your good fortune might be restored?” she asked as she put a small collection of flowers into the tiny vase that sat on William’s tray.

I tried to curl my mouth into a comforting smile, but my lips kept pulling downward, so I gave up. “It’s extremely unlikely,” I admitted.

“Well. No wonder I’m so comfortable around you,” she said with a small smile.

“Both of us are straddling the line between classes. I’m glad that Bram was able to bring you back. He was terribly inconsiderate, kicking you out that way.”

“I’m a stranger of no consequence. It was perfectly normal for him to send me on my way, and I want you to know that I realize how unfair it was for me to demand this favor when it really wasn’t his to give. I’m imposing on you, and for that I apologize.”

“I know what desperation feels like,” she said, looking up from her self-imposed task. “You didn’t ask for anything inappropriate or extravagant. You asked for a place to sleep.”

I wondered what kind of life this woman had lived, growing up a commoner. What desperation was she referring to? Was it only certain times in her young life or had it been constant? It made me realize just how little I really knew about the constant struggle of the lower class, and that added just one more layer to the guilt I felt. “Regardless, I am very grateful to have the chance to come back,” I said in earnest. “And I hope you will let me return some of your kindness. Do you need any additional help here? I’m not afraid of work.” No, what I was afraid to do was hurt or maim another human being, but that was better than letting my family suffer. “Think of me as just another servant.”

She looked at me with a strange tilt of her mouth. “I don’t know how I would feel about letting a gentlewoman work in my house.”

“You do not hesitate to run this home as a lady, though you weren’t born to it.” I shrugged. “We all must adjust to our circumstances.” No matter how cruel they may

be.

She looked at me with her brow furrowed, clearly not liking my answer. “Are you looking for a permanent position? I thought from what Bram said that you were on your way to somewhere.”

“It would be temporary, just until the Sprinns return from their seaside manor.” Might as well dig into my fake story.

“I’ll ask the housekeeper if she has any extra work that you could help with. But really, Fae, I’d be happy to just have you visit with us.”

My smile was incredulous. “You’d invite a peasant Fraug to join your house party?”

She laughed, continuing to arrange flowers. “Yes, and why not? If you haven’t figured it out yet, this is a very odd assortment of people I’ve brought together.”

“You are very kind. But I think it’s better if I ask the housekeeper to give me an occupation so that I can stay out of everyone’s way.” *And spy more easily.*

I hated the feeling of churning guilt in my gut.

“If that is your decision, I will respect it.” She stepped back to look at the trays and then nodded to herself. “I will speak to the housekeeper soon and send her down to speak with you.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Baylor,” I said out of respect.

“Kinley, please.”

I nodded in genuine gratitude. “Thank you, Kinley.”

She left, her steps driven with purpose. What a fascinating woman. And how terrible that I would have to disrespect her by causing harm to one of her guests. It *would* harm him. I was certain of it. Kill him, no. But Jeshua had insisted on punishment and suffering. I just hoped it would be short-lived. Regardless, it must be done soon. Jeshua had only given me three days. Each day after that would increase my family’s pain. My only path was forward.

“Will this do?” the housekeeper asked as I followed her into a well-appointed guest room. I’d half expected her to look at me with a sniff and a scoff, but after Kinley had introduced us, she’d been nothing but helpful and smiling.

“Yes, of course. It’s more than enough,” I assured her, setting my bundle of belongings on the bed.

“Wonderful. Mrs. Baylor had me put a few dresses in the wardrobe that you may use for as long as you stay. You are welcome to join the others for meals, or I can have them sent here.”

“Oh no,” I said, feeling terrible that such hospitality was being offered me when I was only here to do something abominable. “I am more than happy to come down to the kitchen and eat there. I don’t want any extra effort being made on my behalf. Truly.”

The housekeeper didn’t argue. She just bowed her head and said, “As you like. Do let me know if you require anything else.”

“Thank you so much.”

She smiled and took herself off, her chatelaine tinkling as she went.

I pressed one hand to my chest where my necklace hid beneath my bodice, finding comfort in the tangible reminder of my home and family. Then my other hand went to my pocket where the bottle of elixir resided, and all those good feelings fled. I crossed to the window and looked out onto the grounds as I tried to make my mind come up with a plan. Where should I look? How should I get William to drink the liquid? Would I need to be introduced to him? Probably, otherwise I might punish the wrong man.

My thoughts swirled and jumped, growing frenzied and loud. Finally I set my hand against the cool window glass and closed my eyes, willing my heart to slow. I had to calm down and be methodical. Breathing slowly and deeply, I was able to quiet my mind and focus.

That is, until someone spoke from the open doorway. “I see you’ve found your accommodations.”

I turned to see Bram standing there, his hands clasped behind his back as his blue eyes scanned the room. He stood precisely with his toes nudging up against the invisible line that separated the hallway from this room, as if he’d positioned himself that way so that if I were to close the door, he wouldn’t even have to step back. I wondered if it was conscious or unconscious, the way he came as close as propriety permitted but no further. Either way, I found it endearing.

“Yes. Thank you again for allowing me the chance to—”

“I made a promise,” he said softly.

“But you didn’t have to keep it,” I reminded him.

He took a deep breath, his blue eyes piercing me with their sincerity. “I think I did. I can’t explain why, but it feels like it was necessary.”

I blanched a little at that. It sounded too ominous. Or maybe too hopeful? “I hope you don’t expect something miraculous to come of my presence here.”

He gave an easy smile. “Not miraculous. I just don’t believe in coincidences.”

Yes, well, coincidence had *nothing* at all to do with my presence here, but I would let him believe whatever he wished. I was here; that was the important thing. I had a chance to free my family and myself. “In that case,” I said, trying to sound at ease, “perhaps my presence *is* miraculous. I will sprinkle good fortune as I tidy up along with the housekeeper.”

“You’ll sprinkle it?”

“Yes, quite abundantly.”

“And does this good fortune look like dust or flower petals or...?”

I couldn’t help the smile that curved my mouth. When was the last time anyone had teased me? Probably when Tennison was alive. “It depends on the person, of course.”

“Ah. Of course. How silly of me.”

“I imagine your good fortune would look like autumn leaves.”

His eyes brightened, seeming to like that idea. “Really? And what about our hostess?”

“Kinley’s would look like daisy petals.”

“And what about you?”

“Me?”

“Yes. If I were going to sprinkle good fortune over you, what would it look like?”

I breathed in through my nose, trying to imagine just that. I needed all the good fortune I could get. “Rain.”

A corner of his mouth pulled up. “You make a habit of getting wet?”

I shrugged. I couldn’t tell him about my penchant for swimming in lakes and rivers. It felt too personal. Better to stay in the realm of imagination.

But the more the silence stretched, the more I became keenly aware of the way we stood together, comfortably conversing.

“Well,” he said, clearing his throat, but before he could say more, a shout sounded from down the hall.

“Bram, just the person I needed to find.”

Bram turned toward the person and soon that person walked into view. He was well dressed but looked comfortable, like he wasn’t trying to impress anyone.

“Kinley told me I wasn’t allowed to let you skip our adventures today.” He opened his mouth to say more but then caught sight of me. He immediately turned to face me and gave me a formal bow. “My apologies, miss. I did not see you there.”

“It’s quite all right,” I assured him, wondering if perhaps this was William. I hoped not. He looked so jovial and carefree.

“You must be Fae, the woman my Kinley is so excited to be housing. How do you do?”

I was startled by the idea that Kinley was excited to have me here but managed to say, “I’m very well. Thank you.”

“My name is Rylander Baylor. I’m pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“You as well, and thank you for allowing me to stay in your home.” Heavens, this was awkward. My insistence that I impose in this house was so very awkward.

“My pleasure. Bram here told me he owes you a great debt.” He slapped Bram’s shoulder, making him stumble forward a step and immediately pull himself back, putting himself once again strictly in the territory of the corridor.

I would have refuted the claim and insisted it was not so great a debt, but I’d seen his desperation to reclaim the locket and I could not bring myself to diminish its value. “I was happy to help.” I dropped my gaze, too overwhelmed by Rylander’s open enthusiasm and Bram’s intensity.

“I suppose it’s time for us to go?” Bram said, presumably to Rylander.

“The horses are waiting, as are Fynn and the others,” Rylander answered. “Good day, Miss Fae.”

I looked up to tell him goodbye and then watched him go. Bram stayed for another moment but didn’t end up saying anything other than “Good day.”

The housekeeper had asked me to join her at the noon hour to assist in meal planning. Apparently Kinley had told her that I was from the genteel class and had suggested that I might have some experience with such things.

I was happy to help, especially since it was clear that all of the men—William included—had gone hunting or fishing or some such other gentlemanly activity.

I kept looking out the windows to see if they were returning, but the only people I saw were four women out on the back lawn, practicing archery.

After I'd helped the housekeeper and taken lunch in the kitchen, I was heading back up to my room when I passed by the drawing room.

"Fae, is that you?" someone called from within.

I backed up and peeked inside, finding Kinley sitting down to tea with three other women.

"Oh good," Kinley said and waved me inside. "Why don't you sit down with us for a moment?"

"I wouldn't want to intrude, Kinley." And my time would be better spent snooping.

Kinley rolled her eyes in a way that spoke of her common upbringing and made me smile. "It's not an intrusion. If it were, I wouldn't have hollered for you to join us. Here." She gestured to an empty chair. "Please sit."

"All right." I couldn't very well turn down such a kind invitation, and if I were honest, the prospect of taking tea with these women sounded so very *normal* that I didn't truly want to resist. "Where are the others?" I asked, hoping that Lady Gerty would not be joining us.

"Both Their Highnesses as well as Lady Gerty and Lady Welmire decided to do a bit of archery." Kinley gave a shake of her curly head. "Ella has tried to interest me in the sport on a number of occasions, but I just don't enjoy it."

I nodded and looked around the room, waiting for someone to make introductions. It took Kinley a few moments, but then she seemed to remember her duties as hostess. "Oh," she said, sitting up. She gestured to the dark-haired woman who sat beside her, who looked a bit uncomfortable in the way she sat up straight and held her cup and saucer. "Fae, this is Suzannah Amaro. We've been friends pretty much our entire lives, and now she's married to my brother, Fynn."

"How do you do?" I said, and Suzannah just smiled with a nod.

Kinley indicated the blonde who sat across from her and had round, soft features. "This is Mira Jessop. I grew up with her and her husband."

Mira smiled unabashedly and stuck out her hand. "Happy to meet you," she said.

"And you," I said, shaking her hand even though it was something I'd never really done before. Royalty did not tend to shake hands.

Kinley indicated the woman sitting to her left, who looked like she fit this setting perfectly well, holding herself with a grace that I recognized. Her clothing was delicately trimmed, and the flowers in her hair cried wealth without being ostentatious. "And this is Miss Aveline Mantock. She and I met while I was serving as a house maid at her parents' manor. Ladies, this is Fae."

"You're the Fraug?" Miss Aveline asked.

I nodded.

"And you truly don't mind being called such?"

"Not at all. It's practically a term of endearment. Plus, saying Valefraugian isn't much better."

Her brow furrowed. "I don't think I would appreciate being called the name of a slimy creature who lives in dirty water."

I laughed to cover my nervousness at having my pretend origins questioned. "I suppose it's such a normal thing in Valefraug that I've never thought twice about it, Miss Aveline."

She waved a dismissive hand through the air. "Please, just call me Aveline."

I nodded. "Very well."

"And you helped Bram?" Aveline asked, surprising me with how serious she looked. Bram's description of her had made me imagine her as so dramatic that she might fling herself onto a couch in a swoon at any moment. Instead, she looked poised, attentive, and serious.

"I did," I acknowledged.

She gave a small smile. "Thank you for assisting him. I know that locket means a great deal to him. It shouldn't," she said with an odd little tilt of her head, "but it does."

I wanted to ask what she meant by that, but luckily Kinley did it for me. "You don't approve of his attachment to the locket?" she asked.

Aveline gave a small sigh. "He uses it to punish himself for something he had no fault in."

I was suddenly desperately curious to know the story of Bram's locket.

"How does a person punish themselves with a piece of jewelry?" Kinley asked.

Aveline gave a meaningful lift of her brow. "Do you know what's in it?" she asked.

Kinley shook her head.

Aveline looked at Kinley and her expression seemed to indicate that she'd realized something for the first time. "I suppose you don't have much experience with this sort of jewelry, considering your background."

My eyes darted over to Kinley just in time to see her mouth curve up before she hid it behind her teacup. I was glad she found the tactless comment amusing instead of insulting.

Aveline looked back to me. "That locket was meant to be a constant reminder for him. And the woman who gave it to him shouldn't have. Not when she had chosen to marry someone else."

The woman who gave him the locket had married someone else? And still given him such a personal item? It did seem cruel, and yet I was too familiar with the political maneuverings of the upper class to condemn her. The marriage may not have been truly wanted by this mystery girl. "What if it wasn't really her choice?" I asked. I could imagine it all too well.

"It doesn't matter," Aveline insisted. "If she really cared about him, she would have wanted him to forget her and move on."

"Do any of us truly want an old love to forget us and move on?" Suzannah murmured into her tea, then seemed uncomfortable when our attention turned to her. She quickly set her cup on the table and then clasped her hands tightly in her lap. "If Fynn had chosen someone else, if he hadn't ever..." She searched for the right words.

"Stopped being a fool," Kinley supplied.

Suzannah smiled but shook her head. "If he had never taken notice of me as anything other than your friend until it was too late... I think I quite like the idea of him pining over me."

Kinley smiled. "He would have deserved it."

Aveline heaved a rather loud sigh. "That's my point. Bram *didn't* deserve it."

Kinley looked contrite. "I know, Aveline. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to suggest that Bram deserved his heartache."

I had a sudden and growing respect for Aveline Mantock. Yes, she did seem a bit dramatic, just as Bram had suggested, but it was clear that she was also loyal and fiercely protective of her older brother. I had to wonder what Bram had done to earn that loyalty.

Then I had to remind myself that it didn't matter. I had a job to do, so I decided to be nosy. "Are all of the men gone?"

"Yes. They're on the hunt for a good pheasant or two."

"Who is the best marksman among them?" I asked, because I could think of no other way to keep the conversation focused on the men.

"William," they all said in unison.

My brows jumped, gratified that they had brought up the one gentleman I was truly concerned with. "Is that so?"

Aveline nodded. "It's not even close. My brother is a fair shot, and Lord Welmire isn't bad either, but Sir William never misses."

"And, forgive me, but I'm trying to get all these names straight. Is Sir William married?" I knew he was. I'd seen the second cup on his morning tray, but more information was better.

"Yes, of course," Aveline said, her voice full of confusion, "to Princess Kalina."

My face contorted in surprise, I was sure of it. "He's Princess Kalina's *husband*?" I asked in shock. William was married to Dalthian royalty? How had King Jeshua managed to leave out *that* detail? "Oh," I muttered.

Suzannah gave a little tilt of her head. "How funny to have someone who doesn't know everything about the royal family."

"I suppose it's only natural, coming from a different kingdom and all," Mira added.

Indeed. Quite natural for me not to realize I was going to purposely hurt *the husband of a princess*.

The hatred I had for Jeshua and this entire situation expanded, and I had to sit there and do my best just to breathe for a few minutes.

I hated this. I hated it so much.

After visiting with the ladies, I wandered the gardens for a time until everyone seemed occupied with afternoon activities, then I climbed to the upstairs corridor where many of the guests' rooms were and was brave enough to go into three of them. But there was really no way for me to know which room belonged to whom, and each hour that passed by made me more and more anxious.

So I visited the kitchen and tried to ascertain what was being served for dinner and how I might go about giving the elixir to William. The bottles of wine that would be used for the meal were already pulled out but not opened. Not that I could just pour the elixir into a bottle. Whatever pain it would cause was meant for William alone. But how could I put it into his glass when I wasn't invited to dine with the group, and when my presence around them would be strange at best and suspicious at worst? There was nothing I could do to plan anymore. I'd just have to be on alert and take my opportunity when it came. Or I'd have to make my own opportunity.

When the dinner hour approached, I kept to my room. Only after the noise of the guests going down to dinner had quieted did I open my door and peer out. While they were occupied with their dinner conversation, I would try to observe from the shadows.

I slipped from my room and trod carefully toward the stairs, but as I reached the top and looked down, I saw the top of a man's head as he climbed the stairs. I quickly retreated and slipped silently back into my chamber. Hopefully whoever it was would pass by and I could continue my reconnaissance.

I waited with my ear pressed to the door and jumped when someone pounded on it from on the other side. I pressed a hand to my heart and took a moment to slow my breathing and calm my face before opening the door.

Bram stood on the other side, a dinner tray balanced on each palm. That explained the pounding; he must have kicked the door to get my attention.

"Bram, what are you doing here?"

He lifted one tray slightly. "I volunteered to bring your meal up."

"Why?"

"I was on my way up with my own tray anyway. Kinley agreed that I could escape the usual socialization tonight."

"How kind of her. I can take that," I said, indicating one tray. "If you don't wish to socialize, I'm sure you're anxious to have your quiet." And I was anxious to go spy on the dinner guests.

I reached for the tray, but he didn't move to hand it over. Instead he chewed on his lip for a moment before confessing, "I was hoping that you and I might share a meal again."

"Oh." Why? Why would he wish to be around me more? Why would he seek out the company of a peasant Fraug who hadn't been all that nice to him on occasion? And why oh why did he have to be so appealing?

"I appreciated our conversation last evening, and part of the favor you asked for was my company, so..."

Blast. He was right. I had asked for his company—demanded it, even. But that was before I realized what an obstacle he would become. But there was nothing for it now. Rejecting his offer would be rude, and also—I didn't want to. "Yes, of course." I looked at the room and its accommodations. "I suppose if we keep the door open, we could eat at the little table by the window." I stepped back so that he could come in.

He chewed on his lip a little more. "I know it's overly prudish of me, but I'd rather eat out here."

I looked to the corridor with its sparse furniture and complete lack of chairs and then back to him. "In the corridor?"

He shifted from foot to foot. "Admittedly, I didn't think through things all the way before I made the invitation." He cleared his throat, seeming truly embarrassed. "Perhaps we should forget the whole thing..."

We should have. We really should have, but I didn't *want* to forget the whole thing. I was so used to overstuffed men pandering for my goodwill because of my station that this chance to be around someone who seemed to be interested in nothing but me—the real me, stripped of all my titles and finery—was irresistible.

And I could admit that my conversation with Aveline earlier had left me burning with curiosity.

I stepped out into the corridor and made an abrupt and rather brazen decision. I walked over to a fur rug that lay in the middle, turned to face him, and sat on the floor. His brow hitched up, but I just held out my hands. "Give me one of the trays," I prompted, ignoring his startled look.

It took him a moment, but then he bent enough for me to take one of the trays from him and set it on the floor beside me. Then he carefully lowered himself to the rug, one corner of his mouth pulling up in amusement. "Is this a common practice

in Valefraug?”

I shook my head. “I haven’t done this since I was a child, but perhaps we will start a trend.”

“Eating on the floor will become all the rage?” he teased.

“We can hope,” I said with a chuckle as I looked over the food. Roasted duck, leeks, and new potatoes.

As I tried to strategize how I might eat without a table, I realized that the way I was sitting would be a problem. I was sitting on my left hip, with my legs bent off to the right. I could leave the plate on the ground and try to eat over it, but that seemed precarious. If I had any hope of holding the plate and fork at the same time, I couldn’t be leaning to one side.

I let out a sigh and reminded myself that common women who had fallen from the genteel class likely had to make decisions about compromising strict propriety all the time in order to approach life more practically. Besides, I’d immersed myself in water for this man and allowed him to see me soaking wet. So I steeled myself against the embarrassment and moved my legs so I was sitting cross-legged with my knees sticking out like butterfly wings. I took care to arrange my skirts as modestly as possible, fixing my attention on the task in the hopes that by the time I looked up again, my cheeks would have cooled off.

I cleared the nerves from my throat and reached for my plate, balancing it in one hand and taking up my fork with the other. Then I scraped together my bravery and looked up at Bram.

He was looking down at his own plate, but I could see the way one corner of his mouth kept twitching. He was trying not to smile but losing the battle.

I refocused on my plate, taking a bite as I battled the heat in my cheeks. The scrape of his own utensils against his plate were the only other sounds, and after several moments, I decided that awkward conversation would be preferable to awkward silence. I set my fork on my plate and reached for the goblet at my side. “So,” I began, taking a sip, “I’m curious what it is that possesses a gentleman such as yourself to eat on the floor with someone like me.” I raised the goblet again, taking another slow sip as I studied his eyes over the rim.

There was amusement in his eyes but also something thicker, an intensity that I couldn’t name. He also didn’t hurry to answer me but took his time swallowing and then pressing his mouth to his napkin. “A gentleman such as myself,” he said, thoughtfully repeating my own words back to me. “What kind of gentleman do you think I am?”

Such a question could be a very weighty one, but I decided to answer on a surface level instead. “I haven’t figured it out yet. You go by Mister, and yet you have the look of someone who grew up in a titled household. Perhaps the second son of a lord.”

His mouth twitched again, and I found the tiny gesture inexplicably captivating.

“Am I close?” I asked.

“I’m the eldest son of a lord.”

My stomach jumped. I found the idea that he was going to inherit a title exciting, though I couldn’t say why. Normally it would mean that we would socialize in the same circles. Princess Faelyn would have no qualms getting to know a man like that. But Fae? Fae had no right to be dining with him at all. Whether in the kitchens or on the floor, he shouldn’t have wanted to be here. “That brings me back to my question. What is a future lord doing eating on the floor with the likes of me?” I didn’t know why getting that answer felt vital, but it did.

"I told you this morning. You're interesting"—his eyes raked over me—"a puzzle in need of solving."

Though his words were perfectly normal, the way he said them left me feeling a bit exposed. The idea that he wanted to see and examine every single piece of me.

I sucked in a breath. Oh heavens, what a thought. "And once you figure me out, you'll be done with me?" I asked, banishing the idea of him examining all the pieces of my soul.

"Once I figure you out, I'll enjoy seeing how all the pieces fit together."

There it was again! Innocuous words, and yet... "Good luck with that," I said as I picked up my plate again.

"You aren't going to help me?"

I put another bite in my mouth and shook my head.

"Not even by answering a question?"

Questions could be decidedly dangerous, but I couldn't tell him that. I decided to tease him instead. "I'll be too busy sprinkling good fortune to answer any questions."

He smiled, even while shaking his head. "And who will be your first victim?"

"You mean my first beneficiary?" I corrected, taking a bite.

"Yes, of course. Excuse me. Who will you choose to benefit from your miraculous presence?"

I chewed thoughtfully for a moment. "Perhaps I should choose your sister."

He choked on his wine a little. "Please don't."

"Why not? I could grant her good fortune in finding a love match."

"Aha!" he said, suddenly pointing at me. "I've found you out!"

His words would have been concerning if he weren't laughing around them.

"You are Cupid, come here among us mortals in disguise."

I groaned dramatically. "Oh dear, are my wings showing again?"

"Well then, Miss Cupid. Since I have you trapped here in the mortal realm, I demand you answer a question."

I let out a gusty sigh. "I suppose it's only fair. Ask on, mortal."

"Have you ever been in love?"

I choked on nothing but air and had to cough, reminding myself that he was talking to Cupid. He wasn't really asking me. Still, I shook my head vehemently.

His brow raised. "Never?"

"Is that so strange?"

"You are Cupid, after all."

I just smiled and looked at my plate.

"Plus, I told you about my sister. She's in love constantly."

I rolled my eyes. "That's not love, that's infatuation."

"She calls it love."

I arched a brow at him. "But you know it's not."

He gave me a cheeky grin. "Fair enough. Still, I would ask you, Cupid, please don't visit my sister with your love potions. She's doing a good enough job of falling in love all by herself."

"I don't think your sister is as silly as you make her out to be."

He paused in taking a bite, surprised. "Did you speak with her?"

"I visited with Kinley, Suzannah, Mira, and Aveline this afternoon. Her love and concern for you were anything but trivial."

His smile was full of affection for his sister. "I know that. I may find her ridiculous at times, but during those years when I was busy being a fool...she always treated me just as she had before. No disdain or disappointment. It was like

she just assumed I'd find my way, so there was no reason to treat me otherwise."

I considered the power of such actions. The power of someone you loved most trusting you, no matter what.

Our conversation continued, and after we'd finished our meals, we migrated toward one wall so that eventually we sat side by side, our backs pressed against the wooden boards. Bram had one leg stretched out in front of him and the other bent so that he could lean on his knee with his elbow. I had both knees bent and pressed together in front of me, but my feet were set wide. It was a position I'd always felt comfortable in, but one I rarely had occasion to be in since, as a general rule, princesses did not sit on floors.

"You know, we probably could have found an empty sitting room somewhere," I mused aloud.

His eyes became worried. "Are you uncomfortable?"

"No, I just—"

"You're probably right. We could go search out a room with actual chairs." He started to get to his feet, but I tugged on his arm until he sat again.

"I'd rather just stay here," I admitted. "If we go to a room with wingback chairs and tea service, I'll have to behave."

His brow hitched wickedly. "Have you been misbehaving?"

I smacked his shoulder with the back of my hand. "You know what I mean. Propriety and all that."

Instead of leaning his back against the wall as he had before, he turned to face me and leaned on his shoulder instead. But then he didn't say anything.

This man. He was maddening. I'd never before encountered anyone who would dare to sit so close and stare so openly without the least discomfort.

I, on the other hand, was acutely uncomfortable. The way he looked at me made it difficult to breathe for some reason. Why wasn't he saying anything? If he wouldn't, I should, but my mind was blank.

Strains of music floated up from the first floor, giving me an excuse to look away from the intensity of his gaze and focus on the melody drifting through the corridors. It sounded like a violin and a flute. I wondered who played. I wondered if perhaps it was William, and then I wondered how I'd managed to waste an entire evening with Bram when I should have been finding a way to get William to drink the elixir. I hadn't even met William! I'd made no progress at all, because each time I tried, Bram was there.

He abruptly climbed to his feet, and I was worried that he was going to leave. Which was asinine, because it was only him leaving that would allow me to carry out my task. I should *want* him to go.

But he didn't leave. Instead he turned toward me, his shoulders square, with one hand behind his back and the other extended to me. "May I have this dance?"

Oh stars, did he have to be so charming?

I reached up to take his hand, surprised by how quickly he pulled me to my feet. I barely had time to be startled by the proximity of his chest to my nose before he slipped a hand around my waist and drew me into dance position.

"You come from gentility, so I'm guessing you know the dance?" he murmured close to my ear.

"Um..." It took me a moment to focus my ears on the music and identify the song. "Yes," I answered.

"Good," he said, and then pulled back before turning me into a spin, one direction and then the other. He came up alongside me with one hand wrapped around my back and the other holding my hand as he led me in a circle around the corridor.

It was not a very wide circle, but it didn't matter. We looked at each other as the dance required, but doing so when it was just him and me with the candlelight flickering over our faces and no prying eyes was a far cry from doing so in a crowded ballroom.

When we broke apart, I took in a sudden breath, like I hadn't been getting quite enough air while being that close to him. Even as we took up our positions across from one another, the two steps that would be required to get to him didn't feel like enough. I wanted to blame the tension on my guilt or my distress, but I'd had too much life experience to tell myself such lies. I'd never had any man affect me as profoundly as Bram did. Everything about him tugged at my soul, urging me closer.

Why? Why did it have to be him? Now? In this impossible place?

We kept dancing. We danced for as long as the music drifted up from below. Sometimes we followed the steps, sometimes we didn't, but every movement we performed was just a little closer than was the norm, and we were a little slower to pull away.

When the music went quiet and it was only the sound of our breathing that filled the air, we both grew still. My hands still rested, one on his shoulder and one in his hand, while his hand still circled my waist. I stood stiff, afraid that any move I made would bring me closer to him and knowing that such a thing could only bring both of us pain.

So after five thudding beats of my heart, I breathed in carefully and stepped away. "Thank you for the dance," I said, my voice quiet but still loud enough to intrude on the energy that pulsed between us.

"It was my pleasure." His voice was husky. I loved a husky voice.

"Good night, Bram." I yanked my eyes away from his and turned toward my room. I stepped inside, allowing myself only a peek back at him just before the door closed between us.

And then I did the most undignified, ridiculous, girlish thing I'd ever done in my life. I leaned back against the door and slid to the ground, my hand pushed to my chest, trying to slow my frantic heart.

A full-length mirror sat opposite the door, and it was startling to see my face flushed with excitement and my eyes sparkling with interest.

I was a stranger in a strange house, and yet I felt more alive and more like myself than I had in months.

But then my face paled. I was wasting time. My family would be punished for my dawdling if I didn't get William to drink the elixir tomorrow.

I was pacing by the pond, trying to force my mind to be clever enough to come up with some sort of plan. This was the third day I'd been here. If I couldn't find a way to get that elixir to William, Jeshua would take it out on my family.

But I didn't know how to do it. I wasn't clever enough or stealthy enough. I wasn't a spy! Why couldn't Jeshua have just sent one of his soldiers to do his dirty work? Why send me? Was it about power? Was he trying to ruin any chance I had at forming a good diplomatic relationship with Dalthia? Was it for his own entertainment? It didn't make sense. I couldn't make it make sense.

As I was pacing on the bank, chewing on the side of my thumb and trying to force my brain to be devious enough to come up with a successful plan, I heard rustling off in the trees.

I immediately ducked down to hide, though I don't know why I thought that was necessary. Especially when I immediately spotted Bram atop his horse a little ways off with his eyes already fixed on me.

He raised one eyebrow in a question. "Are you hiding from anything in particular?"

There was no good answer for that, so I just awkwardly got to my feet, brushing at the front of my skirt as I asked, "What are you doing here?"

"I come here to think," he said as the horse picked its way closer.

"Oh?" I had to remind myself that he hadn't been privy to my nefarious inner thoughts. *Don't act suspicious!* I prompted myself.

"And I come here to be alone." He stopped his horse and threw one leg over its head so that he could slide down.

If he wanted to be alone, perhaps I should offer to go. But somehow he didn't... sound like he wanted me to go.

"I came here to be alone two evenings ago, to think." He tossed the horse's reins over a branch, then turned back to me.

"And instead Lady Gerty found you?" I teased him.

A laugh escaped him. "Yes. That was quite a special moment." He shook his head. "But that's not the thing that stands out the most."

"Oh?"

"Finding you was much more memorable."

What could I say to that? What did he expect me to say? His words seemed fraught with meaning, but it was a meaning I couldn't acknowledge right now.

And when he stepped forward, his gaze catching on mine, his eyes were laden with meaning in the same way that his words had been.

I sucked in a little breath, trying to ease the pull I felt between us.

He broke eye contact and cast his eyes toward the pond. "I would normally be irritated to have my solitude interrupted, but—"

"But you needed help with the locket?" I said, because that was the only explanation I was ready to hear right now. He was grateful for my help; that's all it could be.

He studied me for several seconds before finally nodding. "Yes. I did need help." He gestured toward a barely-there path that led around the pond.

I started walking close to the water, stepping around plants and over fallen branches while he walked beside me. Aveline's divulgence that the locket had been a gift from a woman made me more curious than was appropriate, and against my better judgment, I found myself asking, "Might I ask about the significance of the locket?"

As he walked along beside me, his hand went to the small pocket in his vest where he kept it.

“Does it have something to do with the change you made in your life?” I asked, determined to pursue the subject of *him* and thus avoid the subject of *me*.

He shook his head. “No. No, it goes back much further than that.”

I walked several more paces in silence and didn’t pry, though his answer made me burn with curiosity.

He came to a stop and lowered himself to sit on a fallen log with a sigh, and I perched myself on the other end of the log, reminding myself not to be too stiff, too royal.

He took the locket out, cradling the round pendant in his palm and letting the chain dangle from his fingers. Then he stared out across the pond, his eyes getting a faraway look. “I was fourteen when I met her.”

A tiny slice of pain lanced my heart at the mention of a mysterious *her*, but I shoved it aside. This was a safe subject. Whatever feelings he had for her, it was better to discuss them than to discuss any other...feelings. “Met who?” I prompted.

“Selina.” He used his thumbnail to pry open the golden orb of the locket, carefully turning it so that I could see the lock of dark brown hair curled up inside behind a tiny dome of glass. Then he closed it up and wrapped his hand around it. “She and I were friends, and there was always the potential for more...” He trailed off, his brow furrowed.

“What happened to her?”

He let out a sigh. “Society.”

My brow furrowed. “Society?”

“Expectations, family demands, keeping up with appearances.”

I bit my lips together, realizing that I couldn’t relate. Not really. Yes, I conducted myself in certain ways because it was expected, but if I hadn’t...I would have only been considered odd. It could have no effect on my station.

A bloodthirsty and power-hungry prince had a great effect on my status, but societal expectations—not really.

“By the time she was sixteen, her parents were already pushing her toward marriage. A lord well established in his title. We laughed about it, both thinking that in the end, she’d get to choose.”

My chest tightened with empathy. “She was forced?” Had the first son of a lord not been good enough for her parents?

He tipped his head back and forth. “Yes and no. She wasn’t tied to an altar and forced to say the words, but her parents dropped hints. Little threats. If she did as they wanted, she would have their love and approval. If she rejected it, she would have nothing.”

“The facade of a choice, but really no choice at all?”

His eyebrows raised when he looked over at me, as if surprised and relieved by my understanding. “Yes, that’s exactly what it was.”

“So she married?”

He nodded. “She held out for a long time. We never said anything outright, never dared to dream of staying together, but I knew it was what we both wanted. So she held out until she was nineteen.”

“How old were you?”

“Only a year older than she was. I was just starting to work with my father, learn how the estate was run. But I wasn’t in a position to...”

“Offer marriage.”

He nodded. "She came to tell me she was engaged, and I—was stupid, and young, and I did not react well. She gave me the locket to remember her." He took a long, stuttering breath. "And I scoffed at it, asked her why she thought I would want such a thing." He leaned his elbows on his knees, moving the locket from one hand to the other.

"That must have hurt her deeply."

He stared at the ground but nodded. "It was unforgivable, lashing out at her that way when it wasn't her fault."

"Did you apologize?"

He shook his head, his shoulders seeming to hunch a little more in shame. "I never saw her again."

My shoulders sank as I realized just how deep his regret must be. I was beginning to piece together how he had gone from a young man in love to a scoundrel, and then turned into the man who sat beside me. "And when she was gone, you sought solace..."

"Anywhere I could find it," he said with a hard edge that spoke of regret and shame. "Whether that was in the arms of a willing woman or the bottom of a decanter." He pressed his palms together, the locket trapped between them, and lifted his hands to his forehead. "She would have been disgusted by my behavior."

The silence settled around us as I tried to put together all the pieces that Bram had given me about himself. But before I could come up with something to say, he raised his head, looking almost surprised that I was still there. "I'm sorry," he said, standing abruptly. "I'm certain you do not wish to linger here, listening to me complain." He offered me a hand, and I took it without thinking.

He moved ahead of me, his steps tense and quick.

"I didn't mind listening," I said as I followed behind him. My words caused him to slow for only a moment, then he kept going. It was true. I hadn't minded hearing his story. His willingness to confide in me felt like a compliment instead of a burden.

We made it back to the horse in only a few moments, and instead of leading his horse while we both walked, he simply turned to me and boosted me up before climbing on behind me. The feel of his warm, solid chest pressed to my back was a bit of a shock—but a good shock. Then he circled my waist with one arm and grabbed the reins with the other, urging the horse forward. He heeled the horse into a trot. The way he handled the horse was less careful, though not so much that I felt unsafe. He was just—restless? Discomfited? Whatever chaos compelled him, it got us to the stables in no time at all, and when he jumped down, he didn't wait with polite patience for me to take his hand and accept his help. Instead he just lifted me from the horse and set me on my feet.

It was fascinating. What I'd seen of Bram up until now had been so very controlled. This version of him was wilder, more chaotic. Not enough to be off-putting, but enough that I noticed. I noticed *him*. I noticed his shoulders and his strength. I noticed the way he tucked his dark hair away from his face and the confidence with which he handled his horse.

And I certainly noticed that he took my hand and held on to it as he led me toward the kitchen door.

We entered the kitchen and he shut the door behind us, then turned to look at me, abruptly dropping my hand as he did so. "I believe Kinley was expecting me to join the party for..." He trailed off.

I just nodded. "Of course. Please don't let me keep you."

"You could come," he offered.

I shook my head. "I cannot intrude."

He swallowed and nodded. "Very well." Then he turned and left.

And finally I could exhale.

That had been...different. I wasn't sure what to make of it. His actions seemed so—I rolled my shoulders, cutting off the thought. His actions didn't matter. I had a task to carry out. I was supposed to be making a plan. I would have to go find out where the party was gathered and see if I could find a way to...serve wine to everyone?

I found the party gathered in the drawing room, playing card games, but everyone was helping themselves to refreshments and drinks laid out on a long table. A servant came in and out to refill the table and remove dirty dishes, but that was all. So unless I forced them to ask me to join them after previously rejecting Bram's invitation, and then tried to clandestinely pour the vial into Sir William's drink... Even my most optimistic daydreaming made that scenario look like a comedy.

I was about to go down to the kitchen to ask the cook about helping with dinner preparations when Kinley spotted me.

I tried to leave unobtrusively, but she called out, "Fae" before standing and crossing to me. "How fortunate you're here."

"And why is that?"

"Lady Welmire is not feeling well, so to have even numbers for our games, we need someone to take her place. Do you mind?"

I forced a smile. "Of course not." This was fine. It was an opportunity to at least earn their trust...so that I could betray them. I shunted that thought aside. Hurt feelings were better than my family being tortured.

Kinley directed me to a chair. "You've already met Suzannah," she said, gesturing to Suzannah, who sat to my left. "And this is her husband and my brother, Fynn."

Fynn gave me a grin from where he sat casually in his chair across from his wife. While Suzannah looked a bit uncomfortable, Fynn seemed to be amused by the situation.

"And this is Lord Welmire," Kinley said, indicating the man across from me. "He will be your partner for the evening. Lord Welmire, this is Fae."

Lord Welmire put his hand out to me, palm up. I set my hand in his and he bowed his head over it. "A pleasure, Miss Fae." His lip tugged up at the corner. I wondered what he thought of Kinley ignoring the usual rules. As a lord, he should have been introduced first, and they all should have expected me to give a last name. What a curious creature Kinley was.

"Well, I'll leave you to it," Kinley said. "Don't cheat," she threw at Fynn.

"No promises," he murmured with a smirk.

Kinley just rolled her eyes and went to sit at her own table with her husband, Princess Ariella, and Sir Gavin.

That left two tables, and one of the men at those tables was Sir William—but which one? The married couples seemed to be arranged across from one another. So it was not the man sitting across from Aveline, and she was at a table with Bram and Lady Gerty. Bram's face was aloof but pleasant. Lady Gerty had her nose raised a bit too high but was trying to appear unruffled. That must be the table devoted to the single guests.

At the last table, I recognized Mira, so the other woman at the table must be Princess Kalina, which meant that the man across from her was William. Sir William. I studied him, trying to see a traitor, someone worthy of punishment. He

didn't look dastardly, but perhaps I could see some underhandedness in the tip of his brows and the muscle twitching in his cheek. This was the man Jeshua loathed.

"Fae."

I turned back to my table companions. "My apologies. I was distracted."

"Not to worry," Fynn said as he handed out the cards. "Do you know three-card carnival?"

"Yes, I'm familiar with it." Though I'd only ever played with Tennison, and then with Ciara when she'd gotten old enough. It wasn't what people would consider a proper, dignified game.

As game-play began, I realized how wonderful it was to be part of a gathering such as this without the expectation that I should act regal the entire time. Looking around, I found myself envious of the little community that Kinley had pulled together. Everyone seemed at ease for the most part, and I didn't get the sense that anyone was putting on airs.

While I enjoyed the card game, I also kept part of my attention on William throughout the evening, and when he stood to go find more refreshment, I stood as well. I added a few things to my plate, keeping my distance as William did the same. Then he crossed to a little table that held decanters and wine bottles. I edged closer as he inspected a few of them and then selected one.

I came closer and picked up a goblet with one hand and slipped my hand into my pocket with the other. He filled his goblet and I uncorked the vial. If he would just turn away for just a moment, I could pour the elixir in.

But no. He set the bottle down, picked up the goblet, and returned to his seat.

I let out a sigh of defeat. *Another time*, I assured myself. *Another time*.

After carefully corking the vial and returning it to my pocket, I filled a goblet only half full and returned to my table.

Bram's eyes caught mine as I took my seat, his expression curious. Or was it suspicious? Either way, I tried to keep my head down and be unobtrusive for the remainder of the games.

When it came time for everyone to disperse, I went straight to the kitchen and declared that I would like to help serve at dinner. Cook looked surprised by my rather abrupt announcement but agreed to it easily enough.

"We could use another hand to clear dishes," she said.

"Or," I said, rallying my courage, "perhaps I could serve drinks? Refill their goblets throughout the evening?"

To my dismay, she immediately shook her head. "Afraid not, Fae. That's the butler's job, and Lawrence takes his responsibilities very seriously."

I swallowed my disappointment. "I'm happy to help however I can."

In the end, it did no good. Cook had been right. The butler guarded the bottles of wine and spirits like a hawk. I wondered if perhaps he was guarding against precisely the thing I was trying to do. So instead I just unobtrusively cleared dishes, doing my best to smile when Kinley frowned at me. I knew she didn't feel right having me act as a servant, but she probably couldn't put her finger on why. I avoided everyone else's eyes, doing my best to imitate the other servants who stood silently and almost invisibly at the ready.

When the soup course was served, I wanted to smack myself. I could have put it in his soup! If I had volunteered to serve the soup, it would have been easy to dump the red liquid in William's bowl, give it a stir, and place it in front of him, but I'd been so fixated on adding it to his drink that it hadn't occurred to me.

I was a terrible spy. Once again, I cursed Jeshua for not picking someone more suited to the job, for not choosing *anyone but me*.

I awoke the next morning from a night of restless sleep. The bed had been comfortable, the room lovely, but guilt and fear were vicious bedfellows. I'd wasted the entire day yesterday. Not only had I not given the elixir to William, but I had yet to figure out how I would do it at all. Sneaking it into his dinner wine didn't appear to be an option. This was taking too much time. I had used up my three days, which meant that by the time I returned, Jeshua would have started adding his awful weights to my family. I had to act today. Who knew how much longer the Bayers would allow me to stay. They may very well expect me to depart this very morning. Granted, Kinley was kind enough that if I were to ask, she would probably allow me to stay, but each day I gave them more reason to be suspicious. Each day, my family's circumstances grew more grim.

I couldn't wait anymore. I had to use what tools I had available to me.

And that meant using Bram.

So I went to the garden to wait for him. I'd seen him leave for a ride on his horse earlier, so I hoped to waylay him on his way back to the house.

I brought my shawl out with me and sat on a bench, but the morning was oddly chilly, so I ended up walking around in an attempt to keep myself warm. I pulled the chain of my necklace from underneath my clothing and ran it through my fingers over and over, trying to draw strength and courage from the family heirloom.

The moment I spotted Bram riding into view, I tucked the necklace away and watched from the gardens as he dismounted in front of the stables and then turned toward the house, removing his gloves as he did so.

"Courage, Faelyn," I whispered to myself and then cleared my throat and called out, "Mr. Mantock." I couldn't bring myself to call him Bram, not when I was about to betray his trust.

Bram looked up, and a smile instantly graced his mouth.

"Fae," he said, drawing closer. "What are you doing here?"

Acting out of desperation, that's what. "Waiting for you," I admitted.

He offered me his arm. "You needn't have waited in the cold. Let's go inside."

I wanted to protest. There were more ears to overhear inside, but it was chilly and I couldn't think of a good excuse to keep him out here. So instead, I took his arm and let him lead me into the house, his hand resting atop mine where it lay on his forearm.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked as we climbed the steps.

"Well enough. And yourself?" Just making those mundane inquiries was difficult when my mind swirled with what I had to do. My hand pressed against the side of my skirt, feeling the glass vial that rested in my pocket.

"Falling asleep was a challenge for me," he admitted. "But once asleep, I slept soundly."

I nodded. "Good, good."

He gestured toward the dining room. "Have you eaten?"

"No." I also wasn't hungry, but the room looked empty, which was what I needed. A quiet room and an enormous amount of gumption.

There was a pot of tea and several cups set out on a narrow table along the wall. Bram dropped my hand and crossed to it, starting to pour a cup while he talked. "I imagine they'll be bringing up food soon enough." He gestured to a chair. "So, if you'd like to sit while we—"

"I need to talk to William," I blurted. Saints, what was wrong with me? Was this really my only option?

Bram's hands stilled. He slowly set the teapot down and then turned back to me, his head tilted at an odd angle, like he was directing one ear toward me to hear better. "You need what?" He took a step in my direction, his eyes narrowed.

For some reason this moment felt more dangerous than any before, and it made me rethink my hasty plan. I shook my head viciously. I'd made a mistake.

"Nothing. I don't need anything. Forget I said anything. Forget me." I turned away from him, wrapping my arms around my waist to make myself smaller as I rushed for the door. Maybe I could sneak into the house tonight or...or...

Bram cut off my retreat, stepping into my path and holding out a staying hand. "Forgive me, miss, but I'm afraid I *cannot* forget what you said."

I fell back a step, grateful when he stayed put.

He looked me over as if he didn't recognize me at all, a distant look of pain lancing across his face. "Is that what this has all been about?"

I didn't answer, because I sensed he was thinking something very different than I was.

"Were you just trying to find your way into this house so that you could arrange a meeting with *him*?"

"No, you don't understand," I huffed in frustration because I couldn't explain.

"Why are you calling Princess Kalina's husband by his first name?"

"It's the only name I had," I answered honestly.

His eyes narrowed. "And did you know he was married?"

"Not until after I'd come here." And what did that have to do with anything?

"You didn't know he was married to the princess?"

"No." That I could safely answer.

His lips pursed. "And if you had known he was a married man, would that have changed your behavior?"

"My behavior?" What behavior? I'd been a liar and horribly deceitful, but he didn't know that. I looked to his face for answers and saw a mix of hurt and disgust. Wait, did he think...? My eyes went wide. "No! No, that's not—" I turned away in frustration. He thought I was looking for some romantic rendezvous with a married man. "I don't know him," I said, wanting to be perfectly clear about that. "I'd never even seen him before a few days ago. He and I are not on a first-name basis. I just only had a first name. I have a message"—of sorts—"that I need to deliver to him, and I was only told his first name and that he would be in attendance at this party." It was too much. I should not have told him so much. But I was out of options and running out of time.

His shoulders slumped just a little. "That's why you're here?"

"Yes."

"Is that why you stayed?"

"It's imperative I deliver the message."

He paused for a moment, then asked, "Is it the *only* reason you stayed?"

Why did he have to do this? Why did he have to be such an open book? I could read the real question on his face. He was asking me if *he* had anything to do with my presence here. But that didn't matter. It couldn't matter. My family and their lives were what mattered. "Please. I just have to deliver—" I swallowed hard, emotion choking me.

"A message?" His face was much more relaxed, and I was grateful he seemed to believe me...even though he shouldn't. "From who?"

"I cannot say. It was entrusted to me in confidence."

His eyes narrowed. "You're lying."

I huffed in frustration. "Of course I'm lying; how else can I keep someone else's secret?"

He spun away and then back and opened his mouth, only to give up and turn his back on me, running both hands through his hair.

He heaved a sigh and faced me again, and it was the strangest thing to notice in that moment that he looked absolutely adorable with his hair rumpled.

"You're maddening, you know that?" he said, but his tone wasn't angry, it was almost...admirable?

I swallowed, curious that he would look at me in a way that made my toes warm after I'd just confessed to lying to him. "So I've been told."

"You truly do not know Sir William?"

"Not at all."

He smiled. With his whole face, he smiled, and if I'd doubted his feelings before, I certainly couldn't now. Bram cared for me. He shouldn't, but he did. It was why the idea of me trying to meet with William seemed to hurt him. It was why he was asking if I had another reason to stay.

Unfortunately, knowing that made this situation so much worse.

The way his gaze skimmed me from head to toe and his husky voice as he said, "I am relieved" made me feel like my heart was being pulled toward him before my guilt yanked it back into place.

"Why's that?" Why was I asking? Whatever he had to say would only distract me.

"Because it's disconcerting how instantly I was jealous at the mention of you meeting with another man."

Never, *never* had a man made me blush the way that Bram could. The way he simply stated his feelings, no coyness or artifice. I had to look away to hide my discomfort, and I didn't know what to do with my hands, so I touched my hair, then brushed at my skirt, then crossed my arms to keep them *still*.

But by that time, Bram was standing just in front of me, close enough to indicate that he intended to do something.

"You don't even know me," I pointed out.

"I know. And yet there's something here"—he pointed to the space between us—"isn't there?"

I should have said no. That would have been the prudent thing to do. But I'd always been too honest for my own good, so instead I said, "Yes."

He smiled again, this time with a bit of relief. "Good." He leaned down, like he was going to kiss me, but it felt too dishonest to allow it, so I pulled back.

"It couldn't work," I said.

He paused, his head still dipped toward mine. "Why not?"

"Our stations, they're..." It was a pitiful excuse, but I had to say something to stop him.

"You know about Princess Ariella and Sir Gavin. You've met Kinley and Rylander. Haven't you seen enough at this house party to realize that such things can be overcome?"

If only that were my biggest concern.

"I can't—" *Can't what, Faelyn?* I asked myself. *Can't fall for someone below you? Can't let a man fall for you when you're about to hurt his friend? Can't let yourself fall further when you know the moment he discovers the truth, he will hate you for it?* "I can't."

He immediately drew back. "Very well." He looked hurt. "I'm sorry if I—"

"I want to," I blurted. *Curse my loose tongue!* "I want to, but I have a job to do. I have to..." What I had to do was shut my mouth and get out of there.

But he leaned closer. "You want to?"

"Of course I do, but—"

He moved closer and my voice died. The warmth and energy that surrounded him started to seep into my skin, and it was such a comforting feeling that I wanted more, more, more.

He took hold of my fingers with one hand, holding them carefully as he reached up with his other hand and trailed a finger behind my ear and just under my jaw. "Might we forget our protests for just a moment?" he asked, no, *begged*.

His eyes were so earnest that—fool that I was—I nodded.

He smiled and was suddenly so close that I went cross-eyed trying to admire that smile. And then he pressed his lips to mine in the sweetest, most agonizingly tender way. It was a glimpse of something that could never be, not when I was fallen royalty pretending to be a peasant Fraug.

I wanted to forget it all. I wanted to give myself a few moments of reprieve and just let him show me what it might be like to be...loved.

But even if this connection was the beginning of love, or could grow into love, the truth was that he did not know me, and fully half of what I'd ever told him had been lies.

So though it took all my strength and it felt like tearing out a piece of my soul, I severed the kiss and backed away, shaking my head. "I can't. I have to go."

"But—"

I didn't stay to hear what he had to say. I pushed my way through the house and out the door, and then I ran down the lane.

I strode down the road that would lead me back to the inn, determination propelling each step. I needed to pack up as quickly as possible so that the coachman, Henny, and I could return to Tride. The quicker I returned, the quicker my family would be relieved of the weights around their necks. And that was the best I could hope for. Relieve their suffering as soon as possible, and accept my own fate.

I could not do as Jeshua had asked. I could not risk giving the elixir to William—the princess's husband!—when there was a chance that it would kill him. I would plead with King Jeshua. I would beg for mercy for myself and hope that he would hear me. I was his cousin; surely he would not truly hand me over to a man such as Prince O'Therion. And if he did...

At least my family would be free and my conscience would be clear.

My feet and my lungs hurt by the time I returned to the inn, but my pace didn't slow until I was pounding on the door of the room where Henny was staying. "It's me, let me in," I said.

A chair scraped and then I heard the latch lift and the door opened.

I pushed inside quite rudely, but I was past being polite. "We need to leave," I said.

"You've succeeded, then?"

"No."

"No?"

"As it turns out, infiltrating someone's house and—delivering a message to a high-ranking person is not that easily done." I had nearly said *poisoning someone*, but saying the words felt like admitting guilt.

"It can't be that difficult," she argued.

"Then you do it!" I yelled at her as my composure cracked.

She winced, but only the tiniest bit, and I was annoyed that my anger did not affect her more. Instead she just sighed. "It's not my task to complete."

I scoffed and turned away. "Either way, I've come to realize that it cannot be done. I will have to return and tell the king that I have failed." I turned back to look at her and found her staring, her gaze once more even and unemotional.

"What?" I demanded.

"It must be done, Princess," she said, her voice like ice.

I shook my head. "It can't be done by me."

After several eerie moments of her staring at me, she nodded. "All right," she said and then crossed to her bag of belongings. She dug through it and then came back, her hand outstretched.

She held out a folded missive.

My heart sank and my face crumpled. "What is this?"

"King Jeshua asked that I give this to you if you ever lost your nerve."

The corners of my mouth pulled down as I fought the well of emotion that rose up. Another note. The last time Henny had given me a note, it had made my situation all the worse. My fingers trembled as I reached for the parchment. If Jeshua had anticipated this outcome and had prepared for it...I could feel the chains tightening around me as I broke the seal and started to read.

Cousin,

I realize this task may be more difficult than you can bear. I worry that you will think to sacrifice yourself to your former fiancé rather than carry out my simple orders. So let me be clear. If you do not do as I've asked, your family will not survive the coming months. Your sister will be first, followed by your mother. It won't just be a weight that hangs around their necks. Your success is paramount. Do not fail.

By the way, I'm afraid I misled you in my first missive. Once six days have passed, giving you three days to travel and three days to fulfill your task, I will start adding weights to your family's chains. Thus, they will each carry three weights if you return on time, and more if you cannot accomplish your task in the time I have allotted.

Your family is suffering, Faelyn. Only you can stop it.

I couldn't stop the tears this time. I gasped for breath, and my knees buckled beneath me. All the while, Henny just stood where she was, maddeningly immovable and loyal to her king.

"Did you know?" I shouted at her, the letter shaking in my hand. "Did you know he would threaten my family? Did you know he would hurt my twelve-year-old sister? Did you..." I shook my head, at a loss.

She stood there with her lips pursed and said only, "It must be done."

I shut my eyes and turned away.

My experience fleeing my own kingdom had made me believe that I knew what it was to be desperate, but this...this was an entirely different level of desperation. If I did not find a way to carry out Jeshua's wretched order, my family would die.

I didn't cry for long. I would have liked to. I certainly needed to, but there was no time. It wasn't just my happiness or my family's comfort that hung in the balance. It was their lives.

And so I would go back, and I would use Bram. I would do my utmost to turn my heart to stone and ignore everything but my objective. I could not let my worry slow me down. I could not let my feelings cloud my judgment. It had to be done. Sir William was a traitor to Tride, and the king had every right to decide his fate.

I skirted past the pond, ignoring the temptation to delay the inevitable and wallow in the water. I circled the exterior of the house until I found the kitchen door. I opened it and walked in as though there was nothing odd about my actions.

The cook glanced up. "Hello, Fae," she said in surprise. "I was told you'd gone."

"Yes, I forgot something. I'll be on my way soon enough. Will I be disturbing the houseguests if I go back up to the room Mrs. Baylor allowed me to sleep in?"

"Can't imagine you will. They're gathered in the drawing room, so far as I know."

"Thank you."

I hurried out, heading straight for the drawing room. If I could catch Bram's attention and get him to come talk to me...

As I entered the main corridor, I stayed close to the wall, walking quietly along until I was just barely in view of the open doors that led into the drawing room.

For some reason, it felt natural that I would spot Bram standing by the hearth, a glass in his hand as he observed the room around him. He had a commanding presence, but that meant that he was left alone much of the time, and I was fairly certain that was what he preferred.

Glancing around at the guests that I could see from the doorway, it seemed that nearly everyone else was engaged in conversation in small groups scattered about the room. So when my gaze turned back to Bram, it wasn't much of a surprise that his eyes had found me. He looked surprised, of course.

I gave him a grim smile and tipped my head to gesture down the hallway, hoping he would recognize the invitation to come find me. Then I stepped away, out of the line of sight of anyone else inside the room. I retreated, passing by the dining room which was being prepared for dinner even though it was barely past noon, and stopping just in front of the library doors.

It wasn't long before Bram came into the corridor. As soon as I caught his eye, I went into the library and waited for him to follow.

Those few moments as I waited in the middle of the library felt like decades. I was about to use Bram in order to hurt William.

I pulled my shoulders back and waited. I was doing it to save my family.

He stepped inside only a few moments later. "Fae," he said, still seeming surprised.

"Hello, Bram." I looked at him, and somewhere deep in the back of my mind, I recognized just how numb I was. His presence left me with a slight aching sadness, but my mind had no room to deal with such things right now.

"You left," he stated.

"Yes, I'm sorry about that," the hollowness of my own voice sounded foreign. It should have concerned me, but it didn't.

"And now you're back." He narrowed his eyes at me, perhaps in an attempt to break through my frosted outside.

"I need to ask you a favor." I pulled my eyes away, too worried that whatever genuine concern I might see on his face would be my undoing.

"Of course. What do you need?"

Of course? As if giving me what I wanted was the most natural thing in the world. I shoved my jumbled feelings aside. "I need you to bring Sir William here." There were decanters of wine sitting along one wall. This room would work.

"William?"

"Yes."

"So you can deliver your message?"

"Yes."

His eyes searched my face. "Why not give it to me? I can take it to him."

"I can't do that. Please, Bram. Please just bring him here." *Please just let me get this over with.*

"Why are you asking me?"

I looked into his eyes and swallowed. "Because I trust you."

He came close and raised a hand, skimming my jaw. "I want to trust you," he said.

I was used to being the one to make other people uncomfortable. Or at least I had been up until three months ago. If a situation had called for it, I could have made a servant quiver or a man go running with only a glare.

Now I was the one squirming, but he wasn't glaring. He was looking far too sincere.

His gaze caught mine. "Every one of my instincts tells me you are good. Everything inside me wants to know you better. And yet..." His fingers trailed down my neck, reminding me of the kiss he'd given me, the way it had promised so much more than just a moment.

I closed my eyes, fighting a shiver, wishing I could forget my precarious position and the danger to my family. I wanted my numbness to melt away so that I could appreciate this moment and what it could have meant in a different life.

He tugged on the chain around my neck, and I was in such a haze of wanting and resisting that I didn't react quickly enough.

My eyes flew open and my hand flew to where the pendant rose above the neckline of my dress. I grabbed on to it and tried to pull away, but his hold on the chain was firm.

"What's this?" he asked.

"It was a gift." I lied through my teeth, my hand tightening around the engraved oval stone.

He must have seen the terror in my eyes, because his expression filled with compassion. "Let me see it, Fae."

I shook my head. This wasn't supposed to be a negotiation. I just needed to speak with William.

"You just told me that you trust me," he pointed out. "Was that true?"

My lower lip trembled, but I said, "Yes" as part of my numbness fled.

"Then let me see it. Please?"

If I refused, he would have more reason to doubt me, but if I showed him... I squeezed my eyes tight. If I showed him, at least he would know the truth. I opened my eyes, allowed his sincere gaze to give me courage, and then I released the pendant and dropped my hand.

He smiled with soft encouragement, then dropped his eyes to the necklace. As soon as he got a good look at the pendant, his eyes widened and then darted to my face. Abruptly, he yanked on the chain, causing it to break and taking away my one

possession.

I lunged for it. "Give that back," I demanded.

He held it out of reach. "Did you steal it?"

"Give it back, Bram!" I yelled, tears flooding my eyes. That medallion was the one thing connecting me to my home, my family, my country, the loyalty of kin. It was *mine*.

He was so startled by my passionate and desperate demand that he lowered his arm and allowed me to pry it from his hand and then retreat, clutching it to my heaving chest as I tried to calm my panic.

He studied me, suspicion and concern both chasing each other across his face while I took tiny, shallow breaths in an attempt not to lose my mind entirely. Finally he asked quietly, "Did you steal it?"

I shook my head. I couldn't stand the thought of him believing I was a thief, so I blurted out the truth. "It's mine."

He looked unconvinced. "Can you even tell me what that crest means?"

I nodded. "It's the royal crest of the Lochridge family." I couldn't help the way my spine straightened and my chin tilted up as I said it.

He fell back a step, which broke my heart just a little. "And how would a peasant Fraug come into possession of such a thing?"

I couldn't answer.

"Who are you, really?"

I shook my head, too afraid to say it out loud.

"You already told me that medallion belongs to you. If that's true..."

I pinched my lips, holding my peace.

"The only people who wear that medallion on their person are the members of the royal family of Morwen themselves."

My heart sank, and I shrugged as a tear streaked down my face. "Then you know who I am," I whispered.

He stared at me for several seconds before saying stiffly, "You're a princess of Morwen."

I nodded.

"But—" He rocked back a step. "But the princess of Morwen is..."

"Exiled—"

"Engaged to Prince O'Therion," he said as his eyes narrowed.

I let out an almost feral noise. "Not anymore," I insisted, unable to keep my lip from curling.

He stepped back, hurt marring his face. "Do you mean to make a fool of me?"

I blinked, shocked that that was where his mind went first. "No. Never."

"I was falling in love with you."

His words both elated and injured me. "And I—"

"Did you think because of my reputation, that I would—"

"No, of course not." What twaddle was he spouting? Had he not heard me?

"I told you, that is not who I am, not who I want to be."

"Did you not hear what I said?" I asked, my voice rising. "I told you I was in exile." I was flabbergasted that he wasn't the least bit curious about why. "Are you at all curious about what I meant, or do you only care about some perceived insult to *you*?"

He blinked in surprise. "Exiled? No, I suppose I didn't hear you say that. I was too distracted—never mind." His eyes still held hurt, but now it was coupled with concern. "Please tell me what happened. You are exiled? How is that possible? I'd heard rumors. Everyone knows Morwen is unstable, but I thought the rest of it was

just...wild speculation.”

I gave an angry shake of my head. “We did our best to keep it quiet, but I’m certain many of the rumors are true.” I considered what to say first. What to confide in the first person who knew my identity and now wanted to know. “My father is dethroned, Bram,” I said, the words fighting past my constricted throat. “Prince O’Therion came with his army and his violence, trying to move up the wedding. Trying to force a marriage at the point of a sword.”

“The Prince of Lyastra invaded Morwen? When?”

“More than three months ago.”

“And he...forced you out of the country?”

I scoffed. “Hardly. He would have preferred we stayed imprisoned there. I was supposed to be his bride so that he could claim the throne with more legitimacy. We only made it out by the grace of a few good people. O’Therion had every intention of marrying me only a few days after he arrived. He didn’t want the alliance we had brokered. He wanted the entire kingdom, and he got it.” I closed my eyes as the hurt of that betrayal and treachery washed over me once more.

When I opened my eyes, I saw his hands twitch and start to reach for me, but he held back. “But he did not get you.”

“Something I am eternally grateful for. We were fortunate. We got out, but that left us with nothing. No home, no crown, no kingdom, no friends.”

“Where did you go?”

I wanted to tell him. I wanted to tell him everything about me and my history and my pain. But Jeshua had been clear. The only thing more important than delivering the elixir was that my actions not be tied back to him. If he were blamed or even suspected, he would make my life miserable. And he would make my family suffer. “Saldine,” I lied. “My mother’s native country. We’ve been hiding there. No one but her family knows who we are.”

“And why are you really here? What does William have to do with all this?”

I took a strained breath but then shook my head. “I want to tell you everything. But I cannot.”

It was like I had slapped him. The look of betrayal and hurt on his face was startling. Did my inability to confide in him really hurt him that much? He looked away, pulling at his chin, then looked back with frustration etched into the lines of his face. Finally he dropped his arms so that they slapped against his sides. “Is your name Fae?”

I swallowed hard. “Faelyn.”

He gave a slight nod as his jaw worked. “Shall I bow, then, Princess Faelyn?”

His words and the bitterness that soaked them rang through my chest like a clanging bell. I blinked and shook my head. “No.”

“But you are a princess.”

“That hardly counts.”

“It always counts, Highness.”

I sucked in an angry breath through my nose but kept my voice even. “I need to speak with Sir William. Will you arrange it? Please?”

“And if I bring him here, how shall I introduce you?” he asked, looking tired.

“The common girl that saved a precious momento? Or a princess in hiding?”

His slight sneer was my undoing. “Do you have any idea what it’s like to have your entire life torn out from underneath you? Do you have the slightest notion what it feels like to be beholden to family—so beholden,” I added, my nose wrinkling in disgust, “that you can’t say no when you are sent as a little *errand girl* for a pompous relative? Do you think I enjoy this subterfuge? I’ve had to lie about

everything, simply because I cannot be myself in this situation.” My voice grew thick as all my loss piled up around me. My kingdom, my freedom, my family. “Who would believe that a princess of Morwen would be reduced to rags and sent to a foreign kingdom on her own? No one.” I glared at him as all my hurt combined with all my anger and started spilling out all over the floor. “So you can wrap yourself in all the indignation you possess, but this is my reality.” My voice rose and my hands shook. “I must do this, and it must be done without my identity being known. So, *please*, Bram Mantock of Dalthia, will you *please* help me by bringing Sir William here? *Please*.”

My lungs hitched and jolted as I held tightly to what little composure I had left.

Bram, to his credit, looked sufficiently chastised. He swallowed and looked away before he brought his gaze back to me. “I’m sorry, Fae—Princess Faelyn,” he sharply corrected himself. “I *am* sorry. You’re right. I’m just still...surprised and...”

“I don’t need you to be sorry; I just need you to help me do what needs to be done. I need to have one single conversation with one gentleman so that I can be done with this responsibility.” Mostly I needed him to stop making me think there could be any end for us other than an abrupt parting the moment my task was finished. Because if he kept being so kind, it would only be that much more difficult to do what I must. And as soon as the elixir was administered, I would flee, and I would not be able to look back.

Jeshua had told me how important it was that no one know my identity. I’d failed at that. He’d also told me the importance of no one knowing that I was the one to administer it. I would fail at that as well. Bram would know. The only confidence I could keep was not to let him know that it was King Jeshua who had sent me.

And hope that was enough to appease the king.

Bram—sweet, trusting Bram—had gone to get William. So I crossed to the decanters that sat by the crackling fireplace and I pulled two goblets from the shelf below, pouring a small measure of wine into each. Surely he wouldn’t say no to sharing a drink with me. It would be impolite to reject an already poured glass.

I slipped my hand into my pocket and wrapped it around the vial.

But then the door opened.

I turned to see Bram and another man come inside.

“William,” Bram said. “This is Miss Fae. Fae,” he said to me, “this is Sir William.”

I nodded in thanks.

“I’ll let the two of you speak.” He bowed and backed out the door.

I turned my attention back to William. He seemed to be several years older than Bram, but his expression was more shuttered, though kind enough. “A pleasure,” he said with a brief bow.

I curtsied low. He supposedly outranked me by quite a lot, after all. Married to Princess Kalina. *I might be killing Princess Kalina’s husband*. I pushed the thought aside. “Thank you for being willing to speak with me. I know it’s odd. Would you like a drink?” I stepped aside so he could see the already poured goblets.

His brow furrowed. “I suppose.”

I turned around, blocking the goblets from view. This was it. He’d agreed to drink it. I quickly pulled the vial from my pocket and carefully uncorked it, then held it over one of the cups, ready to pour—and froze.

Do it! I screamed at myself. *This is the only way to save your family; just do it!*

My hand shook violently and my eyes were so wet with tears that I could hardly see the goblet in front of me. But all I had to do was pour. Just tip the little glass

vial, let him drink the wine, walk away, and it would all be over. The bottle shook, my hand tilted a little more.

I pulled back instead, holding the vial against my stomach.

“Miss Fae, are you all right?” William asked from behind me.

I corked the vial and slid it back into my pocket. “Yes, well enough.”

“Bram said that you had something you needed to speak with me about.”

I closed my eyes, realizing I would need to come up with yet another lie.

“I, uh...” I grabbed the goblets and turned to offer one to him.

He took it, looking confused by my offer as well as my obvious tears.

“You are an expatriate, I hear.” It was all I could think to say. “From Tride?”

“Yes.” He didn’t expound but looked at me with confusion and a hint of suspicion.

“I am from Valefraug,” I babbled, “and I thought perhaps—”

“I’m sorry,” he said, cutting me off and setting his untouched wine on a nearby table. “Bram said that you had a message for me.”

I shook my head. “He must have misunderstood. I only wanted—”

He held up a hand. “I’m sorry, miss, but my absence from my wife and from the activities arranged by my host is quite rude, so if you have no message, I must excuse myself.”

“Yes, of course, I beg your pardon.” I dropped a quick curtsy and watched him walk away, both relieved and completely devastated.

As waves of guilt and helplessness washed over me, I sank down onto the chair nearest me, disgusted that I'd almost gone through with it but terrified of what the future held now that I knew I must betray Jeshua. The king.

I pulled my fist from my pocket, opened my hand, and stared at the vial, its blood-red liquid shimmering in the light from the fire. I held it up, staring at it as I contemplated everything this wretched vial represented. My face reflected back at me from the glass, but it appeared red—as though covered in blood. The liquid quivered as my hand shook, and my whole body started to feel cold.

"What's that you have?"

I closed my fist around it, sucking in a breath as I turned on my seat to see Bram standing in the doorway, his brow furrowed and concerned. I tried to bury the bottle deeper in my skirts. "Nothing."

He closed the door and crossed quickly to me, reaching for my hand. "It's not nothing." I tried to pull away, but he gently pried my hand open and took the bottle away from me. He stared down at it and then back up at me with a look of dismay. "What is this?"

"I—" My shaking turned the word into a tremor.

Bram pulled the stopper from the bottle and brought it to his face.

"No!" I screamed, pushing to my feet and lunging for the bottle, afraid he'd taste it.

He held it up and out of my reach. I stepped back, glad it was away from his mouth. Then I looked in his eyes and my heart sank. Betrayal sparked there. "What is it?" he asked.

I swallowed hard and tried not to let the tears fall. "Something I won't use."

He reared back, disgust and horror marring his face. "But you were going to? Planning to?" His voice rose. "Who was this meant for?"

I shook my head. "It doesn't matter."

"It matters to me," he said, his voice even louder. "It matters very much to me. I invited you in. I gave you..." He trailed off, but I knew all the things he could have said.

Food. Shelter.

Love.

"Everything," he said.

I closed my eyes and twin tears slid down my cheeks.

"Why would you do this?"

I shook my head. "I never wanted to."

"And yet you were going to."

"I didn't have a choice. Even now, I wonder if I should go through with it, because what is the alternative?"

"The alternative is to not murder one of my countrymen!"

"It is not meant to kill him," I insisted, shaking my head. "They said it would not kill him. They only said I must give it to him. Those were my only instructions. Put it in his drink, that's—"

"You are not that naive, *Princess*. I may not know much about you, but I know that."

"They said there would be no long-lasting damage." It was my last and weakest defense.

He frowned and shook his head. "A vial of unidentified liquid meant for your enemy will most likely kill them."

He was right. Of course he was right. If Jeshua was willing to kill my family for my failure, then certainly it was meant to kill. "I know! Why do you think I'm standing here crying over it?" I pushed my hands into my forehead and paced back and forth, the tears a near-constant on my face.

Bram watched me silently for a long time before finally speaking up. "I don't understand, Faelyn. Who gave this to you?"

I sniffed and shook my head, determined to at least keep that secret. "It doesn't matter who. What matters is that they have my family. And because I could not bring myself to use that vial, my family's lives are forfeit. And yet, here I stand." My voice rose as the unfairness and futility of the situation swelled in my gut. "I have not completed my assignment, and the tool I was to use for that purpose is in your hands. I am *relieved* not to be able to carry out what I was ordered to do, but I am also *bereft*." My hands hung limp at my sides and my head felt too heavy to hold up. "I am powerless. I am ashamed and angry and I don't know if I can live with myself once my family is killed because of my cowardice."

At some point during my tirade, Bram's face had morphed from anger and disgust to...compassion. So when he gently said, "It's not cowardice," any shred of composure I still had crumbled.

"Tell that to my little sister." The words were ripped from me as the consequences of my refusal flashed through my mind in horrid and gruesome detail. "Tell that to my mother, who will have to watch her die. Tell that to my father, who will watch it all before being imprisoned for the rest of his life." I started to cry in earnest as I realized that I had no way out. "Or maybe they'll kill my father as well, and then me when I return."

"Who ordered you to do this?" he asked again.

I shook my head, clinging to my stubbornness in an attempt to feel in control of something, *anything*.

We stared at each other in the tangled silence for several long moments before Bram went to the door, opened it, and stepped out.

I was stunned. He'd left me. Should I take my chance and leave? Should I run? Was he giving me a chance to escape punishment? Or was he coming back?

My question was answered a moment later when he stepped back in and closed the door behind him. "I've sent a servant to ask Sir William to join us again."

I pursed my lips and furrowed my brow. "Why?"

"Answers."

Why was he suddenly so calm?

The clock on the mantle ticked and I stood there, refusing to sit or move or speak. I had lost. In every way possible, I had lost.

Bram didn't try to speak either, but he did slowly make his way over to me, and even though I refused to even make eye contact with him, he reached out a hand and set it gently on my shoulder.

How was it that one kind gesture could make me crumble? But it did. My shoulders hunched and my face creased, and as a sob rose in my throat, I collapsed into his chest. Bram's arms were immediately around me as my whole body convulsed with sobs and my knees buckled under me.

Bram helped me into a chair, where I let myself weep.

I was only just starting to get myself under control when the door opened and I pulled out of Bram's arms, turning away to hide my tears. Though it seemed ridiculous under the circumstances.

"Shall I come back?" I heard William ask, clearly uncomfortable to have walked in on my emotional eruption.

"No," Bram answered. "Please come in, Sir William. I'm afraid we have something very serious to speak of."

"That sounds ominous." Sir William let out a nervous chuckle.

I pulled myself together enough to look up and watch as Sir William took a seat across from us. His eyes settled on me, concern radiating from him. "Miss Fae, are you all right? I apologize if anything I said earlier—"

"Please don't be nice to me. I don't deserve it," I said, choking on the sobs that kept trying to come up.

Bram set a hand on my knee, and I was shocked at how much that small gesture gave me strength. "This may sound strange," Bram said to William, "but do you have any enemies?"

Confusion twisted William's features before he said, "Yes, I suppose so."

That response surprised Bram. "You do?"

William gave a little shrug. "Some view me as a traitor to my kingdom."

My gut clenched, wondering if William would figure it out. Was all my determination to keep my secret worthless? Would I have to further betray King Jeshua by naming him as the man who had asked me to hurt William?

"Viewed by whom?" Bram asked.

William's jaw worked back and forth as he seemed to contemplate just how honest he wanted to be. "I grew up with King Jeshua."

Bram's brow jumped in surprise at this revelation. "The Tridian king?"

William nodded. "As we got older, I became his...errand boy. And as the years passed, his requests became demands, and those demands became more unsavory. I finally had to say no."

Bram turned to me, and I could tell by the knowing look in his eye that my secret was a secret no longer. "The royalty of Morwen are related to the Tridian royal family."

I didn't answer, but I didn't look away either.

"You and your family didn't flee to Saldine. You fled to Tride."

A silent tear coursed down my cheek. Having Bram know that truth was horrible at the same time as it was a relief.

"Might I ask what this is about?" William asked.

Bram's eyes cut over to William as if remembering we had someone else in the room with us, then he turned back to me. "Would you like me to explain?"

I shook my head. This was my mess. I couldn't hide behind Bram, and it was clear that the truth could not be concealed any longer. "No." I let out a careful breath. "No, I'll do it." I took several more breaths and then wiped my face with the handkerchief that Bram had stuffed into my fist at some point. Then I looked at William, whose face was patient but also desperately curious. "My name is Faelyn Lochridge. I'm the daughter of King Tristan of Morwen."

William sucked in a slow breath as he drew back in his chair. He blinked. "That's why you look so familiar. You're Cousin Faelyn."

My brow jumped in surprise.

He waved his hand through the air. "That's what Jeshua called you. I was often at the palace, but when your family came to visit, I was asked to stay away." He looked at me, his face twisting in confusion as he glanced over my common clothing. "But what are you doing here, Highness?"

I swallowed with great difficulty. "My family had to leave Morwen. We sought refuge from King Jeshua. In exchange for his hospitality, he told me I must do him a favor or my family would suffer."

The alarm that crossed William's face was sudden and stark. "What favor?"

I turned to Bram and gave him a slight nod. He pulled out the vial and set it on the little tea table that rested between us and William. “She was to put this in your drink.”

William went white. “Jeshua—” He fell back against his chair, his breath shallow, clearly shocked. “Is that meant to...did he ask you to kill me?” His face contorted in angry disbelief.

I vigorously shook my head. “He promised me multiple times that it would not cause lasting damage, but...yes, I think it might be meant to kill you,” I admitted, my voice small and strained.

“Huh,” he said after several moments. “It seems the king’s memory is long and his need for vengeance great.”

The silence was thick as we allowed William time to digest the sudden information. Finally he looked up at me. “You said your family would suffer.”

I nodded. “At first, he just threatened to...hurt them. But after I was here...I was given a letter from him that made it clear that my failure would cost them their lives.” The last words came out in a strained whisper as I fought to keep my tears at bay.

William burst to his feet, making me flinch. But then he started cursing Jeshua’s name and I realized his anger was not directed at me, which left me shocked. I’d just admitted to very nearly killing him, and he seemed to have skipped right over that fact, directing all his ire at his former king.

“We have to help her, William. We can’t just let the Morwenian royal family—”

“I know,” William said impatiently. “I know. I just...I can’t think straight. I need Kalina. I need to speak with Gavin.” His eyes fixed on me, and the empathy I saw there nearly knocked me over. “We’ll figure this out.”

I desperately wanted to believe him.

It was quite the gathering. Princess Kalina and Sir William. Princess Ariella and Sir Gavin. Rylander and Kinley. Myself and Bram.

The rest of the guests were occupied elsewhere.

The ticking of the clock was the loudest sound in the room as we all stared at the bottle of poison sitting on the tea table.

Eventually, Princess Kalina was the one to break the silence. "So...this poison was meant to kill my husband?"

"We believe so, yes," Bram answered.

Princess Kalina's brow lifted. "But we don't know?"

I shook my head. "I don't know what it is or what it is meant to do. But I assume that if the effort was worth Jeshua sending me here, death is the most likely outcome."

Her Highness stared at me for several moments. "Thank you for not going through with it."

I turned my face away in shame. I never should have gotten as close as I had.

"William is safe for now." This time it was Princess Ariella that chimed in.

"However, there is the question of the Morwen royal family."

"And Faelyn's safety as well," Kinley contributed.

Bram nodded. "Unless Faelyn returns with news that she succeeded, and the servants she was sent with confirm her story, she and her family will suffer, possibly be killed."

Rylander reached over and picked up the vial. "So then, the first order of business is to find out what this is and what it does," he said.

"Why do you say that?" Princess Kalina asked.

He looked around as if confused that not everyone knew what he was thinking.

"Because if we're going to spread news of the misfortune that has befallen our dear Sir William, we must know what that misfortune is."

I stared at Rylander for several moments before I understood just how brilliant his plan was.

"Planning to kill me off, are you?" William said with half a smile.

Rylander shrugged. "I don't see any other way."

"But how can we discover what it is?" Kinley asked. "We can't very well go asking the local apothecary. If we're going to fake William's death—which is a sentence I never thought I'd utter—then we must keep all this information very well guarded."

William held out his hand. "Give it to me. I'll take it and ride to the palace. King Forrester has a trusted apothecary he employs there."

I was stunned into silence. They could have so easily had me arrested for what I'd been about to do. Instead they were helping me without question. They were willing to lie to their friends. It was humbling—and almost unbelievable.

Princess Kalina looked relieved. "Good idea. And you can also let my parents know that you won't actually be dying," she said with a nervous little nod of her head, "so they needn't start a war when they hear the news."

He nodded, and then his face brightened and he gave a little shrug. "Or maybe it's not meant to kill me at all. It might just be a test of Faelyn's loyalty. She might have given it to me, watched me be sick as a dog for a few days, and then had only that to report."

"As I said," Rylander reiterated. "First thing is to find out what it is."

"I don't understand." All eyes turned to me when I let the words slip out.

“What don’t you understand?” Rylander asked.

“You’re all willing to do this...to lie to your friends, your guests, your family. And for what? You don’t even know me. I lied to all of you.” I looked to Bram and Kinley for answers.

But it was Princess Ariella who spoke up, her hands rubbing at her wrists. “We know Jeshua. I personally know how far he’ll go to manipulate people.” There was a metallic ring to her words, a hardened edge that made it clear she *did* know. She’d been hurt by Jeshua.

“You’re not the only one,” William said, staring at the ground and brushing his palms back and forth, “to have done things they regret.” He looked up at me, his eyes haunted. “Jeshua ordered me to do many things that still bring me shame.”

Princess Kalina reached over and set her hand on his arm.

“He’s my cousin. I’ve known him my whole life, but I didn’t know,” I said, shaking my head. “I didn’t realize what kind of a person he was, not fully. Not until he asked me to do this.”

“He can be very charming when he wants to be,” Princess Kalina confirmed.

“But he won’t get away with it this time,” Princess Ariella said with a firm nod.

William had kissed his wife and left within the hour, the vial carefully stowed. It would have been faster for him to take a horse, but we’d all agreed that he needed to avoid being seen as he traveled to meet with King Forrester, so he’d taken a carriage instead. His travel there and back would only take two hours or so, but we had no way of knowing how long it would take the apothecary to identify the liquid. Would he be able to know what it was from smell alone, or would the process be more elaborate?

I didn’t know, and so I distracted myself by wandering the grounds and trying to find something to occupy my hands. I could have stayed with some of the others, but being around them felt wrong, like my presence tainted the room.

After walking through the back gardens, I drifted into the trees and came upon several lines of rope tied between trunks and an abandoned basket of wet laundry. Some servant must have come out to put it on a line but then been called to other duties. I didn’t think twice before picking up the heavy fabric and doing my best to toss it over the line.

Bram found me that way. “That’s not a sight you see every day,” he commented, looking tired and worn but still achingly handsome.

I tried to smile, but it was small.

He stepped closer. “I hope you know that no one expects you to help with this, especially now that we know who you are.”

I gave a humorless laugh. “I almost prefer being a peasant.”

He was silent for several moments as he watched me straightening the fabric.

“Can I ask you something?” he finally said.

I looked at him fully and said with all sincerity, “You can ask me anything.” He knew my secrets, which meant I had no reason to keep anything from him. I wanted him to know me. I wanted him to *want* to know me.

“What you said about falling on hard times as a noblewoman, was that just a story?”

I was impressed by the lack of accusation in his tone and was happy to answer. “That was my attempt at being as honest as possible when I couldn’t be honest at all. My family and I certainly did fall on hard times. I just left out the part about the betrothed who laid siege to our home and tried to force me to marry him.”

“And your family?”

I blinked. I didn't want to think about my family. "What about them?"

"I don't know much about the royal family of Morwen. Is it true you have a sister?"

I nodded. "Ciara. And yes, she really is twelve years old. She's like...sunshine." I frowned down at the fabric in my hands. "Or at least she used to be." Her light had dimmed considerably in the past months.

"If this plan works, what then?"

I knew I must have looked crestfallen. "I can't think beyond that. I'm too worried that it *won't* work."

"You think King Jeshua won't believe the lie?"

"Or perhaps he'll believe it at first, but then what? William can't play dead forever."

"What then?"

I pulled another heavy sheet from the basket. "I don't know. I don't know what to think. I just know I can't rely on anything."

I hefted the sheet over the line and was surprised when Bram's hands joined mine, helping me to straighten it. When he caught my eye, I paused, watching him swallow before he gave a little shrug of his shoulder and said, "You can rely on me."

How could he say that? And why would he offer such a thing? To help me as one human being to another was one thing, but to offer loyalty after all my lies, after what I'd almost done? "Thank you," I said past the lump in my throat. "I don't deserve it."

"Of course you do. You heard what they said in there. They know what Jeshua is capable of."

"*They* do. But what about you? Have you ever met the king of Tride?"

"No," he said with a shake of his head.

"Then, how can you just trust me, or forgive me, or—"

He put a hand to my cheek, halting my words. "Because I'm choosing to. Because you were as honest as you could be."

"I hate this," I said in a harsh whisper, blinking hard and making my tears fall. "I hate everything about it."

"I know," he said, pulling me in and pressing his lips to my hair.

I sighed into him and allowed myself to cry.

After Bram and I had hung all the laundry, he convinced me to come inside with him. It still felt wrong, and when he reached for my hand, I hesitated. How could he still want to touch me? Whatever the reason, I gratefully put my hand in his and let him lead me inside.

We sat in the empty drawing room. Most of the other guests had gone into the village, so Bram and I sat together and he asked me about O'Therion, about the way we'd met, how we'd come to agree to the betrothal, the betrayal, my escape, Jeshua. I unburdened myself, and Bram readily sat there and listened to it all.

After I'd fallen silent, Bram let out a sigh. "I had heard rumors that King Jeshua was not the most benevolent king, but this..." He shook his head, then looked back at me. "I'm sorry you were forced to go to him for help."

"Me too," I said with a watery smile.

I looked down at our hands that were linked together and watched as his thumb skimmed over my fingertips, wishing I had the courage to confess all my gratitude. Wishing that the undeniable connection that pulled at us was something I could dive into and explore.

The doors opened and Bram and I instantly drew back.

Kalina swept into the room. "William is back," she said, rushing to the front window and pushing the drapes aside. She chewed on the side of her finger as she looked out at the approaching carriage.

"I'll find the others," Bram said and left the room. We could have asked a servant to gather the others, but since these gatherings did not include all of the houseguests, it was best to make them appear more natural and happenstance.

Kinley and Princess Ariella joined us shortly, just before William entered, his traveling cloak still around his shoulders. He went immediately to his wife, and the way he clung to her seemed to answer the question we'd all been wondering. The poison had been meant to kill him. I was certain of it, even without him saying anything.

Rylander and Sir Gavin entered a few moments later with Bram, who closed the door quietly behind himself.

We each took a seat, and it was Princess Kalina, perched beside her husband, her hands wringing and her back rigid, who spoke first. "Well, my love," she prompted. "What news?"

His answering smile was grim. "It seems King Jeshua hates me even more than I believed."

Kalina pulled in a small gasp. "So, it really is..."

"Poison. Hemlock, to be more precise," he answered. "If I had drunk it, according to the apothecary, I would have become dizzy. Numbness would have spread through my body. My lungs would have seized up and stopped working, and I would have died."

My eyes burned hot, but my tears seemed to have dried up. I'd known all along that perhaps that vial would have caused death, but I'd never let myself truly believe it. Now, though, knowing I had come so close to actually administering it to him and that it would have ended his life—it was almost too much to accept.

"I'll admit," William continued, "I hadn't expected that. I didn't truly believe he would stoop to..."

Kalina squeezed his hand, her knuckles almost white. She was holding herself together admirably.

I struggled to swallow. "Do you have the vial?" I asked.

William nodded and reached into a pouch on his belt. "The poison was disposed of, replaced by mere wine."

He handed it to me, and somehow it felt heavier sitting in my palm than it had before—now that I knew what that poison could have done, what it was meant to do. "Do we need this anymore?" I asked, my voice and my hand shaking with a desire to destroy this wretched tool.

William shook his head. "Not unless you think it would be of use."

"Good." I stood and crossed with determination to the fireplace. I glanced one more time at the offensive glass container before throwing it with all my might into the fire. The glass shattered and the liquid hissed. Firelight sparkled off the shards of glass.

I took a deep breath, feeling only marginally better but grateful that the poison was gone and the vial destroyed. I returned to my chair and tried to sit with dignity. We all sat in silence for several moments.

"So then," Rylander announced a little too loudly. "How shall we kill off our friend? I suppose one of us could stop at the inn and announce it, or—"

"We need to call a doctor," Bram said. "We need to play out the entire thing."

"What do you mean?"

“The fewer people that know about the deception, the better. It would be best if only those of us sitting here were aware of it. The Lochridge family’s lives depend on King Jeshua believing the lie.”

“What do you suggest?” Rylander asked.

Bram turned to me, his gaze questioning, but my chin started to quiver and I had to look away. “We have Faelyn dine with us tonight. All the guests will be there. The servants will witness it. William will take a generous swallow of his wine...”

William shook his head. “It will take at least half an hour for symptoms to start.”

“All right,” Bram said. “So we have a leisurely dinner. You drink all your wine, and then near the end of the meal...”

William nodded. “I can have a difficult time standing up. I’ll tug at my collar like it’s hard to breathe. I can stumble about, sit down, start breathing too quickly.”

“But you’ll...die...before the doctor arrives,” Kinley advised.

Princess Ariella spoke up. “Are we really going to let the other guests believe that William has died?” She turned to her sister-in-law. “Kinley, these are your friends, your brother, even.”

“I know,” she said. “And I don’t relish the plan, but”—her eyes cut over to me—“Jeshua has to be stopped.”

Rylan clapped his hands together, his face grim but resolute. “It will make for an interesting evening.”

“It will be mayhem,” Sir Gavin commented.

“And in the chaos”—William looked to me—“Faelyn will slip out, and—”

“She needs to stay until tonight,” Bram insisted. “Running away will make her seem guilty, and we don’t want suspicions thrown her way too quickly, otherwise the servants may detain her. She’ll leave after dark so no one will miss her until morning. That will also give the news time to travel to the inn, so when she arrives, her maid and coachman will already know it’s been done.” He turned to look at me. “You can leave right away and get back to your family.”

As he concluded the recitation of his plan, it was as if an enormous boulder was lifted from my chest. Could it really work? I believed it could. And when I looked around at everyone else, it seemed that they also believed it could work. There were nods of encouragement.

“And once she’s in Tride and has delivered her message,” Sir Gavin spoke up. “What then?”

“What do you mean?” Bram asked. “It will be over, won’t it?”

“I know a little bit of what Jeshua is capable of,” he said as he looked over at his wife. Princess Ariella gave him a small smile, one that said she knew exactly what he was referring to. “And so I know that we cannot trust him to fulfill his end of the bargain.”

“He’s right,” William confirmed.

My heart squeezed as the boulder sank back into place. “You think he’ll hurt my family regardless?”

“Not necessarily, but what exactly were the terms of your bargain? Did he agree to let your family go?”

I pressed my eyes closed and tried to breathe through my worry. “No. The only promise was that he would not hand me over to Prince O’Therion and he would not harm my family.” I jerked my head back and forth, angry that I had to consider yet another angle of this atrocious situation. I opened my eyes to look at the group, desperate for someone to give me more hope. “But surely he knows I would not stay after all this? In his mind, I will have killed a man for him. He can’t believe I would stay in his castle and be content after such a thing.”

“Where would you go?” William asked.

“Anywhere but there,” I answered, thinking through what my mental state would be if I had poisoned William and watched him die. “If I had killed you, I wouldn’t be thinking about my next move. My only concern would be getting my family out and putting as much distance between us and Jeshua as possible. And I have to believe he’ll be happy to be rid of us.”

“What if he prefers having you under his thumb?” William asked quietly.

Bram’s hand convulsed as it held mine.

But I lifted my chin. “If he wants to blackmail me into doing anything else, I’m more than happy to throw myself on whatever sword he points at me and blackmail him in return. If I were to scream his part in this plot to the world, he has far more to lose than I do. I’m willing to face the consequences. He won’t be.”

William considered for a moment and then nodded. “Very well. But I don’t think he’ll make your escape easy,” he warned. “He might deny you transportation or supplies. He may change his mind when you are a stone’s throw from the castle and send his guards to bring you back. There are any number of scenarios that I can imagine. Letting you go means losing leverage, and he won’t like it. Not only that, but if he does delay your departure and word reaches him that I have not actually died...” He lifted his hands in a defeated shrug. “We must ensure that you and your family leave as soon as possible. As such, I think we should follow you to Tride so that the moment you and your family are outside the castle, we can assist you in getting out of the kingdom.”

I blinked hard, almost dizzy with the shock of what he was offering. “You would do that?”

“Of course,” he said as though it weren’t even a question.

I looked around at everyone’s faces, trying to allow myself to believe that the sincerity I saw there was real. Everyone was in agreement. Everyone wanted to help not only William but me. I couldn’t remember the last time anyone had shown me such unfettered kindness.

Three hours later, Bram and I sat in the parlor, along with many of the other guests, including Aveline, Suzannah, and Fynn. Aveline kept shooting me scathing looks, which worried me, but I just did my best to look concerned and awkward, which would be completely natural for a person in my supposed position.

Our plan had gone as well as could be expected. It had been terrible and traumatizing to watch William act out his own death, and the way that Kalina screamed over him as he lay on the floor had left me with shaking hands and a knot in my stomach.

Eventually, Rylander and Gavin had carried William’s “lifeless” body up to the room where he’d been staying. They, along with their three wives, remained in that room so they wouldn’t have to keep up the charade in front of those who didn’t know.

When the doctor had arrived, he’d been informed that he was too late. He asked to see William anyway. We’d obliged, trusting that Rylan and Kinley could convince him to go along with our ruse. I was certain that the presence of Princesses Ariella and Kalina would help convince him.

We were still waiting for the doctor to come down and take his leave. Sitting in this room with the shock and sadness of the other guests was wearing on every one of my frayed nerves, so after Aveline had leaned over to whisper to Suzannah for the third time, I decided to excuse myself.

"I'll leave you all alone," I said, rising clumsily to my feet. "This is clearly a very personal time for you all."

"Oh no, you should stay," Aveline said in the least convincing tone I'd ever heard. "You are such a comfort to my brother."

"She's right, Aveline," Bram confirmed, having stood when I did. "There's no reason for her to be here when we're all so..." He drifted off, looking mournful. I didn't know if he was a good actor or if the heaviness of what we were trying to achieve was wearing on him.

"Good night," I said with a dip of my head.

"I'll walk with you," Bram said, and escorted me from the room.

As we walked up the stairs, I couldn't keep my worries to myself. "I should have left right away. Aveline is clearly suspicious."

"I can handle Aveline," he said, but there wasn't much confidence in his tone.

We arrived at my door, but when I reached for the latch, Bram's hand tugged me back. I looked up at him, a question in my eyes.

"It's going to work out. We're going to get you out of this."

I nodded, but it was forced.

"Trust me," he said, and then leaned down and pressed a kiss to my cheek.

I wanted to sigh and lean into him, but I forced my eyes to stay open and just nodded.

As I opened the door to my room, shouting drifted up from below.

"It must have been her!" Aveline's high voice echoed up the stairs. "We all know it must have been poison, and the only person who is not a trusted servant or friend is *that woman*."

"She has no reason to do Sir William harm," Fynn argued.

"How do you know that? We don't know anything about her except that it was far too easy for her to ingratiate herself with all of us. She could be a master spy for all we know. I want her detained and questioned!"

"We have no authority and—"

"She's right, Fynn." That was Suzannah's voice. "There's something not right about that woman. And if we leave her alone, she'll disappear. I know she will. What if she had something to do with Sir William's death? Do we want Aveline's brother to be next?"

Footsteps sounded, and when Aveline spoke again, it came from the entry hall. "I'm not going to let her out of my sight, not until a magistrate comes and questions her."

Bram was suddenly pulling me away from my own door and down the hall.

"Where are you going?"

"We can't have them detaining you for the magistrate. You have to hide." He pulled open a chamber door at the other end of the corridor and whisked us both inside, closing the door quietly behind us. He put a finger to his mouth to indicate quiet, but it was unnecessary.

If this plan of ours had any hope of working, I had to leave tonight, and I could not leave a trail.

"Where are we?" I whispered as Aveline's shouts continued to ring through the house.

"My chamber," he answered, his focus on the door as he listened.

My throat felt suddenly swollen. He'd brought me into his chamber? I looked around, seeing the telltale signs of masculine living.

As the shouting increased, I realized the flaw in this plan. "You have to go out and talk to them, Bram."

He turned back to look at me.

“Your sister is shouting. Do you normally ignore such things?”

His brow furrowed in concern, but he knew I was right. “Of course not.” He looked around. “Stay in here. Stay hidden in the curtains or something. I’ll come back as soon as possible.”

I grabbed his arm. “Wait. Now that your sister has thrown suspicion on me, I must go.”

He looked panicked. “No. Fae—”

“Distract them. Tell them you saw me run off. Just keep them away from the servants’ stairs.”

“You’re leaving now?” He sounded sad but resigned.

“I have to.”

He nodded. “We’ll come after you. I promise. You won’t be left alone.”

“Thank you,” I said, and I’d never meant anything more. “I have every hope that I will see you again, but it is not a certainty, and so before I go...”

I rallied all my courage, fisted the front of his shirt in my hands, went up on my toes, and pulled him down to meet me. This being the first time I initiated a kiss, our lips bumped awkwardly at first, but after only a moment, Bram had maneuvered himself into the perfect position to kiss me firmly. Our kiss was tinged with haste and fright, but it also felt *right*, like it was the most right thing I’d ever done. Like this was *supposed* to be.

Pulling back wasn’t easy. It was the last thing I wanted to do, but it was necessary. I stepped back, feeling my heart crack just a little. “Go. Take care of your sister.”

“I’m terrified for you,” he admitted, his voice shaky.

Me too. I thought it but didn’t say it. Instead I shored up all my strength.

“Remember, keep them away from the servants’ stairs.”

“Stars and light be with you,” he said before kissing me one more time in a way that felt frightened and aching and hopeful all at once. My heart cried with the poignancy of that kiss.

And then he left me alone in his chamber.

I allowed myself only the space of a few breaths to gather my wits and my courage. Then I searched the room, found a cloak to shroud myself in, and waited until the house was quiet before slipping into the corridor and down the back stairs.

Thankfully, the cloak I’d stolen from Bram was large enough to cover me entirely and black enough that I blended easily with the night. Clouds covered the moon, aiding my escape.

I stayed in the trees that ran along the drive and had to crouch down when the doctor rode by on his horse at a gallop.

I moved as fast as possible through the leaves and foliage that littered the ground, but with so little moonlight to aid me, my pace was frustratingly slow.

When I reached the road, I opted for speed instead of stealth, walking swiftly and constantly checking over my shoulder. I felt every pebble that shifted under my boots, and the stitch in my side had no time to ease as I pushed myself on.

When a carriage approached from the direction of the inn, I pulled the hood closer to my face and hunched my shoulders, hoping to avoid any notice, but then the call of “Fae!” caught my ears.

I looked up, ready to run, but then saw that it was Henny who had called to me. Her head was sticking out the carriage window as it pulled to a stop. She looked relieved. “It is you. Get in.”

Her head disappeared inside and the door flew open. I heaved myself inside. “What are you doing here?” The carriage lurched forward the moment I closed the door.

“The doctor stopped at the inn after he’d seen your dead man. We knew it wouldn’t be long before you showed up, and we wanted to get ahead of any people that might be chasing after you. Do they suspect you?”

“Unfortunately, yes. We should make haste.”

Henny reached up and rapped three times on the ceiling. I felt the conveyance move even faster, and she turned to me, her smile beaming. “Well done, Your Highness. You’ve done our kingdom a great service.”

I turned my face away. “That was not a service,” I said bitterly. I wouldn’t pretend that murdering someone was something I could ever be proud of.

“You have my thanks, nevertheless.” The sound of her settling in her seat filled the air. “Back home we go,” she murmured.

A part of me was relieved, and another part of me was resentful. Tride would *never* be my home.

We traveled all that night. I would have preferred that we change out horses and travel all the next day as well, but the coachman was only human and had to sleep. So we stayed at an inn for the morning and then set off again midafternoon. Over the next two days, I woke before dawn and forced my companions to leave at the first sign of the sun peaking over the horizon, but despite my urging the horses to fly, we could not make the journey in only two days as I had hoped.

The travel was exhausting, especially with my heart so anxious over the welfare of my family. And sleeping was difficult for me. What if our lie was discovered, and news that William was alive reached the palace before I had the chance to convince Jeshua that he was dead? What if Jeshua had already hurt my family? What if Bram and the others weren't able to help us once we left? What if...what if...what if...

We arrived at the palace around midday on the third day. I barely let the coach stop before I threw the door open and leapt to the ground, ignoring the footmen and guards who offered assistance, stopping only at the door to ask the butler where King Jeshua was.

"Eating in the great hall, Your Highness."

"Thank you." How strange it felt to be called by my title again. I rather preferred being called Fae, but no matter.

I hurried toward the great hall, and once again the soldiers weren't fast enough. They'd only just begun to push the doors open when I reached them and shoved my way through, bursting into the hall, my breathing labored from all the turmoil roiling within me.

Jeshua was easy to spot at the head of the table, his hand frozen with a piece of meat halfway to his mouth, surrounded by ten or twelve guests and watched over by four guards. But it wasn't him I wished to see. My eyes fell on my father, who was holding his head up, refusing to show weakness. I could see the strain on his face as he kept his back straight and his head high, fighting against the weights that pulled on the chain hanging around his neck. My mother was not trying to look poised; instead, she held two of the weights in each hand so that only two pulled on her neck. Her eyes fell on me and I saw her shoulders sag in relief, while at the same time her eyes filled with sadness. But my anger didn't boil over until I saw Ciara. She was bent over the table so that she could rest her weighted necklace on the wooden surface, but even the weight of the chain was heavy enough that she struggled to bring her head up in order to eat.

"Faelyn," Jeshua said in a conversational tone. "You have returned."

"Sire, I would beg an audience with you." I needed all the other guests to leave, now.

He paused, studying me with a condescending air, especially when he looked at the plain dress that I'd been wearing for the past four days. "I suppose I can grant your request. You have traveled some distance, after all." He gave a wave of his hand, and everyone other than my family and the captain of the guard stood and made their way out the doors. Many curious looks were cast my way, along with a few of disdain and a few of pity. I ignored them all. They didn't matter.

When the door clanged shut, I looked behind me and saw that Henny and the coachman had joined us. Good.

I turned back to the king. He put another piece of food into his mouth, sucking on his fingers before he looked at me. "You may approach, Cousin."

I stepped closer, my eyes cutting over to my family.

"What report do you have?" he asked.

“You lied to me.” I’d thought a great deal about what to say to convince him of my own lie, and I knew that this was what I would say if I’d truly gone through with poisoning William.

His brow raised. “Did I?”

“Sir William is dead.”

A slow, satisfied grin curved his mouth. “Is he?”

“You said it would not cause permanent damage, but it killed him.” I let my rage over the fact that he had sent me to murder someone ring through my voice. My mother sucked in a horrified gasp.

“You would not have done it otherwise,” Jeshua said easily.

“Of course I wouldn’t have!”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “What’s done is done, Faelyn. Accept it and move on.”

I sucked in a breath, trying to hold back everything else I wanted to throw at him.

Jeshua looked past me. “And you two, do you have anything to add?”

The coachman spoke up. “The doctor that was called to attend the man didn’t arrive in time. They say he drank from his wine glass and then collapsed. Dead.”

Henny nodded her head.

“Thank you both. You may go.”

They each bowed and were soon gone.

When Jeshua turned his gaze back to me, it was with more pleasure—and almost glee—than I had ever seen on his face.

“Faelyn, I am delighted.” He turned to the captain standing close by. “Come, come. We must get these chains off of our guests.”

Though I hated his feigned niceties, seeing the relief on my parents’ and sister’s faces when the chains were removed, seeing them relax in their chairs and rub at their necks that no longer bore the weight, was a boon to my soul. I had done it. Jeshua had bought the lie.

Now to ensure our release. “I believe it is time for us to part ways, Your Highness,” I stated after I’d swallowed enough times to temper my fury.

He gave an arrogant lift of his brow. “You tire of my hospitality?”

“William was Princess Kalina’s husband. The truth of what you made me do could start a war.” It took everything inside me to keep my voice at a normal volume.

Jeshua looked intrigued. Good, he was listening. I didn’t dare threaten him outright, but I needed him to know that I had considered the consequences for myself and for him.

“I have already lost my kingdom,” I continued, “but I do not think you wish to lose yours.”

His eyes narrowed, but he took the time to consider before responding. “And where would you go?”

“Anywhere but here. I care not where I end up, only that my family be left in peace.”

I studied me as he pushed two fingers back and forth along his jaw, then he gave a little nod. “I know my demands have been burdensome, and I do not blame you all for wanting to be on your way. So yes, Faelyn, your family is free to go.”

My chest convulsed and I wanted to sob with relief.

He gestured toward the door. “Aunt, Uncle, young Cousin, please, go to your rooms and prepare your things.”

Ciara ran over to me. The moment she reached my side, I put a protective arm around her and turned toward the door.

“Faelyn,” Jeshua called, “I need another moment of your time. Please stay.”

I stopped, my body tensing with dangerous anticipation.

My parents paused, looking worried and confused.

“Go on,” Jeshua said to my parents, his voice hard this time. “Leave us for a moment.”

My father’s chin raised in defiance.

“I’ll be along shortly,” I assured them, nodding my head toward the door and silently begging them to get out while they could.

My mother’s eyes cut over to Ciara, then back at me, her eyes filled with apology. I gave her a smile, hoping she could see that I agreed with her. *Go with Ciara.*

Protect her, I chanted in my mind.

My mother hesitated one more moment, and then she took my father’s arm and tugged on it just enough to prompt him to leave. I could see what this was doing to my father. I could see the way he writhed inside, the hollowness of his eyes. Everything about this scenario was wrong. But he went, and the moment the doors shut behind them, relief washed over me.

That is, until Jeshua spoke.

“You did well. I commend you for your strength and ingenuity. However,” he said with what I could only describe as relish, “I still have need of you.”

“How so?”

“Just a small favor—”

“Please don’t make me hurt anyone else, my king, please,” I begged. I could not do this again. “You said my family could go in peace.”

“No need to fret, dear Cousin. What I ask will require the sacrifice of no one but yourself.”

The air whooshed out of me. He made it sound like a good thing and yet... “Myself?”

“To Prince O’Therion, of course.”

My breathing became short and raspy. “O’Therion? But...you said—”

“I said many things, but the important thing is what I’m saying *now*.” He sat back on his high chair, looking pleased with himself. “As soon as you arrived, I dispatched a messenger to O’Therion. He’s been waiting a short distance from here so that he could take possession of you as soon as you returned.” The fake cheer had left his voice, and his face was hard. “So if you’d like your family to be safely away before he arrives, I suggest you say your goodbyes and send them on their way.”

I stood there, shaking with fierce anger, then said through clenched teeth, “My king, you said if I did as you asked, I would have your gratitude, that you wouldn’t —”

“Are you asking me to put your own needs and comfort over that of my entire kingdom?”

“No, of course not, but—”

“If I do not uphold my agreement with the prince of Lyastra, I would bring ruin upon my people.”

“Begging you pardon, Your Majesty,” I said, trying and failing to contain my fury and fear, “But why would you make such an agreement?”

He didn’t bother veiling his contempt. “Do not bother worrying about political matters you will never understand.”

“But—”

“Prince O’Therion requires a bride from Morwen. So I can offer him you...” He paused, narrowing his eyes at me. “Or your sister.”

I choked on my tongue. My anger and terror made it so that each breath in and out was a chore. A moment ago, I'd believed I'd overcome the worst of what Jeshua could inflict on me, but as he sat there, reveling in the fact that he'd dealt me another agonizing blow, it was clear that I had not comprehended just how terrible things could be. My little sister, forced to marry Prince O'Therion.

No.

I could threaten to tell the world what he had done, but with O'Therion on the way, it wouldn't do any good. Jeshua could lock me in a room and turn my sister over to O'Therion with little effort. So I held myself together, determined to avoid *that* if nothing else. I choked down the vitriol I wanted to spit at him and straightened my spine. "Very well," I bit out. "I will see my family off." Forcing myself to bend a knee before my departure felt like bending the limbs of an oak tree, but I did it and then turned and departed.

With each step, I told myself to stay strong, not fall apart, stuff down everything I was feeling for myself and instead focus on what I could control—what Jeshua was allowing me to control: getting my family out.

I pushed through the doors of the great hall and walked on feet that felt like boulders down the hall. As soon as I rounded the first corner, I found my mother waiting for me.

She swept me into her arms, and it took everything in me not to shatter right there in her embrace. But we had limited time. I had to explain, and I had to convince her to leave without me.

Eventually, she pulled back, framing my face with her hands so that she could look me in the eye, and when she did, I could see the heavy conflict raging inside her. She was relieved to see me, worried about Jeshua making me stay to talk to him, and completely horrified that I had killed a man.

She believed I had killed a man.

I shut my eyes for just a moment and held on to her wrists, then made a decision. "I didn't do it," I whispered. I could not have my mother believe that I was capable of murder, no matter the reason.

Her eyes flitted over my face, trying to understand.

"I didn't kill him. I couldn't do it. I befriended a man there and he helped me. We faked William's death, then we spread news of it until it reached the people Jeshua sent with me, but I didn't really do it."

She took in a great gasping breath and then let it out in a giant whoosh before pulling me into her arms again. "Oh, sweetheart. Oh, my sweet girl. My brave, brilliant girl." Her body started shaking with sobs, and though I desperately wanted to join her, I could not rest yet.

"You cannot tell Ciara. Not until you are far away."

She shook her head. "I won't. Come," she said, pulling back, "let's prepare our things." She tried to urge me down the corridor, but I made her stay.

"And there's something else," I confessed, my voice so small that I was surprised when she turned back to look at me. "I cannot go with you."

"What? No! Of course you're—"

"Shh," I insisted. "Ciara can't know. Not until the last moment. I have to stay; Jeshua demands it, but please, please, *you* must leave."

Her eyes hardened, becoming the fiercely protective mother I knew she could be. "I won't leave you behind."

"Mother, if you do not go and take Ciara with you, Jeshua will ask of her what he's asked of me." I pinched my lips, hating that I had to tell her the truth but knowing she might not go if I didn't. "Prince O'Therion is on his way here. He's

coming to take me back to Morwen.” I felt her go rigid, but I held on to her, making sure she stayed upright, and looked straight into her eyes to be sure she understood what I was saying. “We both know that I can handle being thrown to O’Therion far better than Ciara could. I could not live with the guilt if she were given to him, and neither could you.”

“Then I will stay with you. I will fight with you.”

I shook my head viciously. “That will only give him leverage against me. If he can threaten you, he can control me. With you all gone, most of his power over me will be gone. You must understand that.”

She looked away, her mouth open as if she wanted to scream—a silent wail as she failed to blink back her tears. Every feeling written on her face was reflected in my own heart. But eventually she did what I knew she would. She shut her eyes in resignation, her chin trembling as she nodded.

“Good. The man who helped me promised to follow me here. I planned for us to meet up with him on the road to Dalthia so that he could help us get out safely. Find him. His name is Bram Mantock. He will help you.”

“But who will help you?” The desperation in her fierce whisper made my heart want to bleed.

I shrugged, feeling helpless, but managed to say, “I will.”

Her frown was deep, but her eyes shone with pride. “Yes, you will.”

“Come. You must tell Father. I’ll distract Ciara. Remember, you *all* must get out; otherwise my situation will be worse.”

We traversed the corridor, our hands holding each other so tightly that it hurt, but I couldn’t loosen my grip.

“Faelyn!” Ciara burst out in relief and flung herself at me the moment I walked through the door. I caught her, squeezing her more tightly than I should have in an attempt to bind my own heart back together.

She would escape, and that was all that mattered.

“What happened? What did he say?” she asked with her head still buried in my shoulder.

I drew back to look at her, curving my mouth into what must have been the most pitiful excuse for a smile the world had ever seen. “Never mind what our evil cousin said. We must get ready to leave before he changes his mind.”

She pulled her chin back in alarm. “Would he really do that?”

I nodded. “He might. So we must hurry. I will help you pack your things.”

As I helped her, I also surreptitiously watched my parents, who had gone into the adjoining chamber and were talking quietly. My mother tried to keep her composure, but I saw my father’s anger and the way my mother was barely able to calm him, only by getting angry and insistent herself.

At one point, my father’s eyes cut over to mine. I did my best to hold his gaze and silently convince him that this was what must happen. The way his brow crumpled and his head shook back and forth unconsciously tore at my already jagged feelings, but I forced a swallow and a nod and then turned back to helping Ciara.

It was amazing how quickly a person could pack up their entire life when that very life hung in the balance. We didn’t talk much as we threw satchels and packs across our backs, and the few words we did speak were stilted and shaky.

Ciara didn’t know just how precarious our situation was, but she could sense the tension that connected my parents and me, so she stayed quiet and watchful. We left our rooms, and as we traversed the corridors and breezeways that connected the different buildings, no one tried to stop us. No one questioned our movements. It

was wonderful, but it felt too good to be true.

We entered the stables and each quickly saddled our own horses. Saddling my horse seemed ridiculous. I couldn't imagine I'd actually be leaving, but it was worth a try. The horses were ready, and still no one seemed to care about our departure aside from some curious looks. I gave Ciara a leg up, while my father helped my mother before coming over to boost me into my saddle. We walked our horses out of the stables, still shocked that there had been no one to intervene.

As we neared the front gate, I was certain that I would be prevented from leaving. I had reason to hope that Jeshua would let my family go, but I was certain that he had taken pains to ensure that the sacrifice he intended to give O'Therion would not escape. Even that knowledge couldn't prevent hope from rising when my father leaned over and said, "If by some miracle they let you pass, do not draw attention to yourself. Do not look back. Just keep going."

I nodded.

When the guards saw us approaching, they called to each other and a moment later, the gate rose. We proceeded through, the guards even giving us nods of respect as we passed.

Would they really let us leave? Each clop of the horses' hooves jarred through me, making my heart pound even harder. Freedom was very nearly in our grasp, in *my* grasp. Had Jeshua not anticipated that I would try to go? Had we readied ourselves so quickly that the guards hadn't received orders to detain me?

And then a hand caught the reins of my horse and all my hope dissolved. "I'm afraid you'll need to say your goodbyes here, Princess Faelyn," the guard said.

I blinked hard, trying to chase away the tears, before looking down at the guard. He didn't look unkind, but his expression was unyielding. So I nodded and told myself that having my family gone would be enough. It had to be enough.

I looked to my family and saw that my father had already taken hold of the reins of Ciara's mount. We all knew she would fight this, but I was grateful to see that he wouldn't.

So I choked down the throbbing ache in my throat and tried to drink in the sight of my family one last time. "Until we meet again," I said.

"No," Ciara said, confused. "You're coming with us. Father, she's supposed to come with us."

"Tell your sister farewell. We will see her soon." I knew his promise was for me just as much as for Ciara. He was promising not to give up on me, but I didn't know if that was a comfort or not.

"Farewell, my brave daughter," my mother said with all the dignity and poise of a queen, even as tears streamed down her face.

The guard tugged on my horse's reins, turning me back toward the castle.

The last thing I saw was my father mouthing, "Farewell" before heeling his horse and leading Ciara's horse with him as she shouted in protest. My mother followed after.

I didn't bother holding back my tears as the guard guided my horse all the way back to the stables. Prince O'Therion was coming, and when he arrived, I would be handed over to him.

I flinched remembering the threats he'd screamed in my face that had led to my family fleeing from our home in the middle of the night. He'd assured me that he would rule over me with a violent and domineering hand. Now that I'd escaped him once, I was certain he would be even more ruthless.

My horse came to a stop. "Highness," the guard said.

I looked down to see that he was offering me a hand down. I took it, practically falling into his arms. There was no more fight in me. It had been all used up in an attempt to help my family get away. But now that they were, it was difficult not to contemplate the appeal of lying down and dying.

"Stiffen your spine, Princess," the guard murmured in my ear. "Don't let him win."

His encouragement gave me just enough strength to stand, but I was also confused. I looked up into his face, wondering how he could spare any kindness for me when he worked for my cousin.

He just gave me a grim smile and swept an arm toward the path that led to the main part of the castle complex.

When I entered the great hall again, all the food had been taken away, leaving only Jeshua sitting upon his throne, surrounded by his trusted guards.

His smile was cruel when I stopped before him. "Were you going somewhere?"

"Just seeing my family off as you asked." The words were a monotone; there was no need to be flowery or try to convince him of anything. He held all the power and he knew it.

He raised a doubtful eyebrow. "On a horse?"

"Would you begrudge me one last ride with my family?" Perhaps if I treated him as though he had some normal human feeling, he would actually act like it on occasion.

He didn't respond, only raised his brow higher.

The silence stretched, and I had to wonder if he meant to make me stand here under his condescending gaze until Prince O'Therion arrived to take me away.

My stomach turned.

"Might I inquire how this accord was struck?" I asked. If I were going to stand here, I might as well try to better understand my plight.

"What do you mean?"

"It was my understanding that you were not acquainted with the prince of Lyastra."

"I wasn't. In fact, I've still never met the whelp prince."

My brow twitched. I was surprised to hear him speak of the prince with such disdain. Though it made perfect sense. Jeshua viewed everyone as below him, and therefore everyone was deserving of being crushed under his foot.

"But a letter arrived from him a month ago, stating that he knew I was harboring your family and asking if I'd be interested in a trade."

I blinked in shock. "You knew before you sent me to Dalthia that you were going to give me to him."

"I don't expect you to understand the weight of ruling a kingdom, but the truth is that I must use every tool at my disposal to ensure the wealth and security of my people."

“What about me?” I asked, my voice an incredulous whisper. “My security?”

“My dear, your safety is guaranteed. The entire point of O'Therion marrying you is to gain the favor of your people. To maintain that, he has to keep you alive.” He looked down on me the way a patient parent would. “I have ensured your health and security.”

I stared at him, disgusted and confounded. Did he really believe that he was providing some sort of service to me? That it was a gift to be handed over to the man who would sooner kill my father than look at him?

“I see you don't agree with me.”

“No, I don't.” I was tired of holding my tongue. And now that my family was safe and my fate was sealed, there was no reason for me to hold back any longer. “There is no part of you that is selfless. There is no part of you that considers the well-being of others. Everything you do is for yourself. For your own satisfaction, your own reasons, your own pride.”

“That's enough,” he said in a menacing growl.

“It will never be enough!” I screamed, unleashing all my bitter anger. “Nothing I could say—no insult, no disrespect, no slander—will ever be enough to repay you for what you've done to me. For what you *will* do to me. You have dismantled every piece of me and crushed it under your heel; the least you could—”

“I SAID THAT'S ENOUGH!” he yelled as he rose to his feet, towering over me from where he stood upon the dais. “Nothing *you* say will change the mind of YOUR KING!” His face was mottled red. “So you will leave these hallowed halls, go to your room, and prepare yourself to meet your husband.” He snapped his fingers, and I was immediately seized by two guards who dragged me roughly from the great hall.

When I reached the suite of rooms that my entire family had formerly occupied, I was met by several servants. A bath was being filled, a dress was laid out on the bed, and the rest of my normal attire was being packed away, no doubt to be sent with me on my journey. Heaven forbid I be sent as a captive to a hostile man without all my good dresses.

I submitted to the servants' ministrations, allowing myself to be scrubbed and cleaned before slipping into the chemise they offered, then allowing my hair to be brushed, braided, and pinned up.

I hated stepping into the elaborate dress they had chosen, even though it was a favorite of mine. The beautiful orange of the outer skirt was bold. The cut of the sleeves was intricate and elegant. The decoration standing out against the cream underskirt scrolled in delicate patterns. In most circumstances, standing before a mirror in the dress would have made me lift my chin, proud of my appearance and emboldened to take on the world. Instead, I stared at the mirror and didn't recognize myself. My eyes held no life. My stance was weak and collapsed, my face pale.

Staring at my hollow expression, I tried to prepare myself for the person I would have to become in order to survive the coming weeks and months. I would have to build a wall inside myself, stone upon stone. I would have to fortify my true self deep inside me, locked away in a vault where no one could get to me—the real me. Then I would have to create a separate self, the self I let people see—indestructible, unflappable—a public face to put on display. I could do that. I could survive like that.

I had no other choice.

Time seemed to slip away as I stared at myself in that mirror, and when a loud knock sounded on my door, I realized that I was alone. The servants had gone at some point. The bath had been taken away. My trunks had been removed from the

room. It was just me, standing there in my favorite dress, bereft. I'd felt like a specter in this castle before, but never had I felt quite so dead inside as I did now.

As the crushing loneliness washed over me, I felt myself crack inside, and everything I'd been shoving down burst out. I ignored the knock and pressed the heels of my hands to my eyes, my arms shaking as I doubled over, my mouth opening in a silent scream. Then I pulled myself straight and spun around, casting my eyes around the room for something heavy, some weapon I could wield. A vase sat on the bedside table, and in my broken and irrational state, I snatched it up, wanting to break it or use it to break something the way I felt myself being broken. As my head swiveled back and forth, my eyes caught on the mirror. I walked close to be sure I didn't miss and then hurled the vase at the mirror, shattering my reflection. I rejected the lifeless version of myself that I saw there—the ghostly version—and enjoyed the way the cracked lines distorted and fractured the pretty picture of myself that the servants had created.

My breaths heaved and I jutted out my jaw. I would not be a specter anymore.

The knock sounded again, more of a pounding this time.

"Enter," I managed to call in a voice that sounded as wooden as my limbs felt, turning to face the door.

Jeshua stepped inside, his eyes cataloging me from my elaborately styled blonde hair to my delicate shoes. "You are much improved."

I didn't respond, choosing instead to work on building that protective wall inside me.

"Come," he said, surprising me by moving further into the room instead of directing me out the door. He took my arm and led me to the window instead. "Do you see that entourage?" He pointed to a carriage rumbling up the road to the palace gates, pulled by four horses. Two additional horses followed behind with their own riders.

I swallowed convulsively. "O'Therion?"

He squeezed my arm until I winced. "*Prince* O'Therion. I wouldn't want you to disrespect your future husband."

"He brought so few men?" I asked, confused.

Jeshua chuckled darkly. "Do you think I would let an untrustworthy and power-hungry man come into my kingdom with more than a few soldiers by his side? No. I told him if he wanted you, these were my conditions. Plus, we agreed that a large entourage would draw unwanted attention to our trade. The rest of his men are no doubt waiting at the border."

O'Therion and his men drew closer, and the gate opened. Soon the clattering of hooves drifted up from the courtyard. When the horses halted, O'Therion, with his familiar furred cape, stepped down from the carriage, and my throat seemed to swell with terror.

I forced a swallow. "And what is the trade?" I asked.

Jeshua didn't answer right away. Instead we both watched from above as the prince directed his men to retrieve a small chest from inside the carriage. Both men looked strong and able, but they seemed to stagger under the weight as they carried it between them.

"The trade," Jeshua finally answered, "is as I said before. Wealth and security." He left me standing there and headed toward the door. "After our guests have freshened themselves, I will come to escort you to meet your new husband. Until then, this door will be locked."

The door shut and the lock clicked into place. I pulled my gaze from the window and stared at the room around me. The space that I had shared with my family for

the past three months. We hadn't been happy here, but we had believed ourselves safe. We had found moments of joy and hope. Sometimes I'd even appreciated the extra time with my parents since they weren't busy ruling a kingdom. I'd never admitted that to anyone. It seemed cruel.

I crossed to the bed and sank onto it, willing myself to go numb. Eventually, I lay back and curled up on my side, my skirts rustling. I stared at the tapestry on the far wall until my vision went blurry and my mind drifted to Bram. Had my family found him? Were he and Mr. Baylor keeping them safe? Would they find refuge in Dalthia? I had to believe they would.

The sound of voices in the corridor made me sit up. I caught my fractured reflection in the broken mirror. My hair was crushed on one side and when I looked down at my dress, it was badly creased from where I'd lain on it.

Looking back at the mirror again, I realized that Jeshua hadn't even noticed that I'd destroyed it, or if he had, he hadn't cared enough to comment. I pinched my lips as my anger and frustration reared up. My one act of defiance and he hadn't even noticed. It wasn't fair. It wasn't enough. I scooted off the bed and started pulling pins from my hair. I would not be presented to O'Therion as some trussed-up pheasant offered as a prize. I took the jewelry from my neck and wrists. I got closer to the mirror, seeing my wild hair, happy that now my appearance was ruined by more than just the shattered glass. I reached out and touched my reflection, looking at the way my eyes blazed and my shoulders were pulled back. If I was going to face Jeshua and O'Therion, I'd much rather do it like this than like some weak little doll who'd been dressed up for the occasion.

A pain lanced through my fingers and I pulled my hand from the glass. I'd cut myself. I looked around for something to staunch the flow of blood, but a drop fell onto the cream of my underskirt, marring the fabric and giving me an idea.

Just as I was taking handfuls of my beautiful skirt and doing my best to squeeze them into ugly creases, marked with blood, the lock of my door turned and the door swung open.

"Faelyn, it is time to—" Jeshua stopped when he saw me and my altered appearance. "What are you doing?" he demanded as he stalked over to me and grabbed my arm.

"If I am going like a lamb to the slaughter, I might as well look like it," I spat in defiance as he dragged me from the room.

"Insolent girl," he spat.

His steps were long enough and quick enough that it was difficult for me to keep up.

"I'll be glad to be rid of you."

My arm throbbed where his hand held it like a vice, and my finger throbbed where I'd cut it, but I welcomed the pain. At least I felt alive. I had a feeling that I wouldn't experience such things once I was firmly imprisoned by Prince O'Therion. I would become an empty shell, a dried-up husk. If this was my last chance to defy Jeshua, I'd certainly take it.

"Open the doors," he barked as we approached the great hall.

I fully expected Prince O'Therion to be there waiting for us, but it was only Jeshua's usual band of trusted soldiers and advisors.

He dragged me up the length of the hall, his heavy steps echoing off the walls. Just before we reached the steps to the dais where his throne sat, he shoved me to the ground. The heels of my hands and my knees hit the stone floor hard.

"Now," Jeshua bellowed from above me as I stared at the stone floor. "You will kneel there, showing proper respect as we welcome your husband. Do you

understand?" He squeezed the back of my neck, pushing my head down so that my nose nearly touched the floor.

My jaw clenched, biting back my response, but I stayed put.

I lifted my eyes just enough to see Jeshua's shoes and the bottom of his cape as he climbed the steps and sat upon his throne.

After only a few moments of rustling fabric as Jeshua adjusted his seat, he said with clipped authority, "They may enter."

The sound of the doors opening was followed by the sound of several pairs of footsteps.

"Prince O'Therion," Jeshua said, remaining seated. "Well met. I welcome you to my kingdom and my home."

From my position nearly kissing the floor, I looked to the side and through my curtain of hair saw three pairs of boots stop to my left.

"King Jeshua."

The sound of O'Therion's voice made me wince, and the muscles in my back almost cramped with how tense they became. His voice was deep and had a raspy quality that I had considered charming when we'd first met. It sounded even more gruff now. Perhaps he'd been yelling more horrendous orders and had strained it further. "Why is she on the floor?"

"To prove her submissiveness to those above her," Jeshua answered as though his response should please O'Therion, which I had no doubt it would.

"And the blood? Have you harmed her?" I couldn't tell if the idea angered or excited him.

"An accident of her own doing," Jeshua answered easily.

"Good, because it is no longer your responsibility to keep her in line." His sharp-edged words sent fear searing through my heart.

"Of course not. That task falls to you. I hope you enjoy it."

My stomach rolled and my eyes burned, so I squeezed them shut, willing the tears away. When I opened them and looked out the corner of my eye, I saw two of the men move forward awkwardly. Then they bent and thumped the small but heavy chest on the floor in front of Jeshua. It was no doubt filled with a small fortune, and I was certain that every coin had been stolen from my home, lands, and people.

"It's all there?" Jeshua asked, his voice thick with greed.

"Don't insult me," O'Therion growled.

His rudeness surprised me. Yes, he was a prince, but he was addressing a king. Wasn't he worried that Jeshua would take offense?

Instead, Jeshua chuckled. It must have been a large sum indeed for him to accept O'Therion's disrespect so easily. "Very well. Take the girl," he said.

I braced myself, or at least I tried to, but the moment I felt multiple hands seize me, a feral scream broke from my throat. "NO!" I cried, trying to pull away, fixing my eyes on Jeshua, hoping that somehow, some way, he would find an ounce of humanity. "Please don't do this, please!" I begged as they pulled me back toward the door.

"This is my only use for you, dear Cousin. Take heart in knowing you will become queen of Morwen, just as you should be, and the alliance between our two kingdoms is stronger than ever." He had the audacity to lift a glass as he said it.

"You're giving me over to a barbarian," I shrieked, clawing at the hands that wrapped around my waist.

"Yes, indeed." His gaze shifted away from me. "Take her before I lose my patience."

I was hauled off my feet then and heaved toward the door. I knew it was one of O'Therion's men dragging me, because as we made our way through the great hall, I could see O'Therion's back as he walked ahead of us.

As we neared the door, I strained to look back over my shoulder. "Jeshua, please." I was weeping, but I had to try one more time. "*Please.*"

He didn't respond and I was thrust through the doorway. The sound of the doors shutting behind us echoed along with my screams. We were only a few steps down the corridor when O'Therion spun around to face me and I flinched.

"Hush, woman," he scolded in a loud, harsh voice. Only...it wasn't O'Therion's voice that said it. And as I blinked in shock, I saw that it wasn't O'Therion's face in front of me. Disbelief clogged my throat, silencing my cries. "I've come a long way for you. You will come with me silently or suffer the consequences." It should have sounded like a threat, and it probably did sound like a threat to everyone else. But it wasn't a threat at all.

I pinched my lips and tried to control my breathing, hoping that my unsteady breaths and tears of relief would be interpreted as fear and grief to the guards who lined the halls.

Bram's face was a study in contradictions. He was doing his best to appear cold and unfeeling, but there was a battle in his eyes. A battle not to show the concern he had for me as he stood in Jeshua's castle, dressed in the clothing of Prince O'Therion, claiming to *be* Prince O'Therion.

I went limp. The overwhelming sense of relief that washed over me left me weak. I could only hope that those watching saw it as acquiescence instead of what it really was.

He took a step closer and lowered his voice. "Don't say anything until we are well beyond the walls."

I gave a slight nod as my mind started spinning, wondering how Bram had managed to take O'Therion's place and suddenly acutely aware of the danger we were all in.

"Come," he said, once again adopting the husky voice that he'd used to imitate O'Therion. Then he gestured toward the way ahead. I managed to pry my eyes away from his face and looked at the man who had been at his side. It was Rylander Baylor.

Summoning my strength, I managed to pull my feet under me with the help of the man who had dragged me away from Jeshua. I looked up to see who it was, almost unsurprised to see Sir Gavin. He helped to steady me for a moment and then let go of my arm when I started walking on my own. I hoped that to anyone else, it would look as if I were accepting my situation and trying to be dignified in doing so.

When I came parallel to where Bram waited, he took my arm and walked alongside me, his gait hurried and probably nervous.

My legs supported me all the way out of the palace, but the moment the fresh air hit my face and I saw the trunks filled with my belongings being loaded atop the carriage, all my strength left me. "I don't think I can walk anymore," I muttered as I stumbled, unable to convince my legs that they needed to hold me.

Bram didn't pause before hooking one arm behind my back and the other behind my knees. "You don't need to," he said quietly. "I've got you."

I gazed up at him for only a moment and then looked away. I could not be caught staring up at my supposedly brutal captor with love and relief. So instead I pinched my eyes shut and waited for it to be over. I could not let my guard down until we were well away from this place. I could not wrap my arms around Bram's neck and kiss his face. I could not cry into his shoulder and let him take away my worry. Not

yet. But I could appreciate the way he held and supported me. I could soak in the feeling of his strong movement as his long strides carried me away from King Jeshua's castle.

When I heard the creak of the carriage door opening, I opened my eyes. Bram leaned forward, and I grabbed on to the frame as he set my feet inside the carriage. I immediately seated myself, relieved when Bram climbed in with me. He scooted me to the far side of the carriage and instead of sitting across from me, he took the seat right beside me, blocking me from view.

A footman shut the door.

Bram grabbed on to my hand where it lay on the seat between us but kept his gaze out the window, his chin tilted up, maintaining the charade.

The carriage lurched forward.

I started shaking.

"Only a few moments more, love," he said, squeezing my hand where it hid beneath my skirt, but still not turning to look at me.

The carriage rumbled over the stone drive, and we passed under the shadow of the first gate.

Breathe, I told myself. *Breathe*.

The carriage slowed, a guard called orders from outside, and then we passed under the shadow of the outer gate.

My lungs were barely working as we continued forward, unimpeded. We were out! We were beyond the castle walls!

I counted three more breaths before Bram reached over to the window and pulled the curtains together, preventing any prying eyes from seeing inside. Then suddenly I was surrounded by him. His strength and warmth. His words whispering in my ear. His fingers running through my hair. His arm around my back.

"Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

"My family." It came out in a scratchy whisper.

"We found them. They're safe."

"Good," I said, nodding my head as though that would prevent the onslaught of emotion that was welling up from the great pit where I'd been stuffing it all for the past two weeks. "Thank you, thank you." No other words made it from my mind to my mouth. I was still shaking, and he was holding me, and when I looked up into his face that was covered in concern and worry, even more of my composure snapped. A sob burst from my mouth. "You came for me?"

"Yes," he said and kissed my brow. "Yes, I did."

"But why?"

"I told you I was coming."

"Yes," I said as tears poured down my cheeks, "but neither of us expected this. That you would have to come to the palace, that you would have to impersonate..." My eyes drifted up and searched his face, wondering how in the world he had managed it.

"Did you truly think I would abandon you so easily?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No, it just never entered my head that anyone would be able to get me away from..." My breath hitched. "Able to free me from..." I pinched my eyes closed.

"Shh," he said. "You are free from it. I have you now."

I curled into him, sighing into his shoulder as I regained my composure. I was so tired, tired enough that as he spoke softly in my ear and ran his hand up and down my back, I had nearly drifted off, lulled by the rocking of the carriage and the warmth of Bram's embrace, when he picked up my hand and tenderly examined the

cuts across my fingers.

“Was this really an accident? Or did he do this to you?”

“An accident,” I murmured, but kept my eyes closed.

“What kind of accident?”

“I broke a mirror, quite spectacularly, and cut myself on one of the pieces.”

I heard fabric tear and felt him bandaging my fingers, but I kept my eyes closed, allowing him to take care of me.

Perhaps it was my fuzzy brain that made me say it, or maybe it was just a truth I could no longer keep inside; either way, I found myself saying the words.

“I love you,” I confessed.

I felt him still beneath me and decided that this confession should be made with my eyes open. So I lifted my head and looked at him. “I know I have no right to, not after everything I did—all the lies I told—but it’s true anyway. I love you.”

His smile was soft, but it radiated with joy and—dare I say love? He hooked his hand around the back of my neck and placed a slow kiss on my mouth, pulling away only marginally as he said, “I think I’ve loved you since the moment you jumped into that pond for me.”

I chuckled through my residual tears. “You loved a peasant Fraug?”

His eyes shimmered even in the dim light of the carriage as he said, “No, I just loved you.”

A full smile bloomed across my face, and it was with a heart wide open that I welcomed his lips returning to mine and allowed his kiss to heal some of the cracks of my battered heart.

The rumbling of the carriage changed and I sat up, worried that something had gone amiss.

“We’re going to meet your family,” Bram assured me. “We’re pulling off the main road. We couldn’t very well hold a foreign prince captive where others would see us.” His expression was half smile, half grimace.

“Who are they with? Did others come with you?”

“Sir William insisted on coming, of course. And we also confided in Kinley’s brother, Fynn, knowing we might need more men.”

I wondered how Suzannah felt about us putting her husband in danger.

When we came to a stop, I got out and found myself in the middle of a glade. Ciara got to me first, throwing her arms around my waist, followed shortly by my mother. I held on to them for a long time, letting myself soak in the reality of their safety and freedom.

When I finally pulled away, I looked around for my father. But when I found him, he wasn’t looking at me. He was standing over the bound figures of O’Therion and his men. William and Fynn were close by, but it was clear that my father had designated himself as the warden. He looked strong, immovable...and ready to filet any of the men who dared make a peep. I might have been upset that he hadn’t come to greet me as my mother and Ciara had, but I knew him well enough to know why he didn’t. I was sure he believed that the best way to show his love for me was to stand between me and O’Therion. And I felt that love and protection all the way down to my toes. It was wonderful to see my father wearing the authority that was rightfully his and protecting his family in the process.

I blinked, realizing for the first time that with Prince O’Therion captured, that may very well mean that we could retake Morwen.

Could we truly get our lives back? I dared not think on it too much. First, we had to get out of Tride.

Our journey was blessedly uninterrupted. I was torn between clinging to my family and clinging to Bram, and I got the sense that he was torn between being within arm's reach and trying to give me space and time with my family. It was an awkward but very sweet dance, and it made me adore him all the more.

William and Bram told me the story of how they managed to intercept O'Therion. Apparently, as part of Sir Gavin's education after marrying into the royal family, he studied closely the royal portraits, crests, and styles of all the kingdoms of Ebrad. Since they were watching the road to the Tridian Castle closely, waiting for me, they were in position to see O'Therion and his entourage approaching. Gavin knew the carriage was from Lyastra due to its distinctive shape, and when he got a glimpse of the prince, he recognized him. Bram was the one who was brazen enough to suggest they attack the entourage like highwaymen, and after they had O'Therion and his men trussed up, it was easy enough for him to decide to impersonate him. Easy to decide, but I was still flabbergasted that he'd pulled it off.

"It's all about confidence," Bram murmured, squeezing my shoulders and kissing the side of my head. "I had a feeling that Jeshua would respect someone who was as arrogant as he was."

"You were right."

"And how grateful I am for that." He rested his cheek atop my head and we let our bodies sway in synchronicity as the carriage continued across the border into Dalthia.

It was a relief to pull up to the Bayers' home. At least it was a relief until the moment we stepped inside and I heard a gasp.

When I looked up, I saw Aveline standing at the top of the stairs, looking horrified and shocked. "What is she doing here?"

"Aveline," Bram started, taking a few steps toward her. "I'm sorry, there's a lot to explain."

"Explain?" she asked, her eyes jumping from me to him and back again. "She's a murderer! Why is she not bound? This little interloper killed our friend."

Bram opened his mouth to explain, but then Kalina pushed past her, rushing down the stairs. "Where is he?"

I didn't have to ask who she meant.

"He's outside," Bram assured her. "Everything went fine. We're all fine."

Kalina rushed out the door.

"Come see, Aveline," Bram prompted her.

She stayed at the top of the stairs, looking furious and confused and uncertain.

"We will explain everything. Just come see."

I wasn't certain whether it was Bram's words that convinced her or the fact that Kalina was completely unconcerned with my presence. Either way, she came down the stairs, her arms wrapped tightly around her, and stepped outside.

Kalina was already in William's arms, and the moment Aveline recognized him, she staggered back, understandably confused. What happened next was a dramatic cacophony of explanations, accusations, tears, questions, and shock. It took a lot of time and answered questions to appease everyone who had been lied to. A small part of me still felt guilty, but the fact that my parents and Ciara were here with me made it difficult to dwell on anything but my utter relief.

After the revelation that William was not dead, the fact that I was a princess of Morwen was almost mundane. Fortunately, aside from Aveline, Suzannah, Ariella, and Kalina, the remainder of the guests had left days before, but the presence of my

family left poor Kinley completely overwhelmed.

"I'd gotten used to being around Ella and her sisters, but playing host to a king and queen!"

I patted her hand and insisted on helping, as did my mother. The last months of exile had made us all rather lax about protocol, much to everyone's relief. We'd considered going to the Dalthian Palace and seeking asylum there, but I felt it was important to first face those whom I had deceived. They deserved an explanation and apology.

Rylander and Sir Gavin, on the other hand, had volunteered to escort Prince O'Therion and his underlings directly to the palace so the Dalthian monarchs could decide what to do with them.

Tomorrow, my family and I would go ask for an audience with the king and queen of Dalthia, but tonight, we dined with Kinley and the few remaining guests and then settled into hastily prepared rooms. Ciara shared my room and my parents were just across the hall. I went to bed without the strangling sensation of lies and threats for the first time in weeks, and the kiss that Bram had left on my knuckles when he told me good night was further assurance that everything would be better tomorrow.

Still, I couldn't sleep. And after it became clear that sleep would not come anytime soon, I got up and threw on a wrapper before lighting a candle and venturing into the hallway. I closed the door quietly behind me but almost leapt out of my skin when I looked down and saw Bram, sitting on the ground beside my door, fast asleep.

The hand I'd pressed to my startled heart moved to cover my mouth as I realized he'd likely taken up that position to protect me. The warmth that flooded my chest left me with no doubt that I did, indeed, love this man.

I crouched down and shook his shoulder. "Bram."

His eyes flew open and he reached for the knife sheathed on his belt, but when he recognized me, he relaxed, closing his eyes and sighing. "Princess."

"I think you know very well that my name is Faelyn."

He ignored my correction. "I couldn't sleep. I was too worried about you. Why are you up?"

"I couldn't sleep either."

He frowned. "Were you worried?"

I shook my head. "I felt perfectly safe, and that sensation has been so foreign to me lately that I suppose I wanted to enjoy the feeling." I reached out and brazenly ran my fingers through his hair, making him sigh. "Will you walk with me?" I asked.

He eagerly nodded and stood.

Without speaking, we both headed for the kitchen and let ourselves out the side door, walking with our hands linked.

"We're going to the pond, aren't we?" I asked.

"It seems only natural."

And it was. When we reached the water's edge, Bram laid down his coat and we sat side by side, enjoying the soft lapping of water and the beams of moonlight that filtered through the trees.

Bram reached up and tucked my hair behind my shoulder.

I turned and smiled at him.

"You're different," he commented.

"Am I?"

He nodded. "I don't know why I didn't see it before. Or maybe I did see it. The way you held so much on your shoulders. Your constant worry. But I thought it was because of your position as a peasant in a foreign country. I didn't realize..." His voice faded and his expression fell.

"You had no reason to suspect my story."

"But I should have seen it," he insisted.

"You saw plenty," I assured him. "You saw so much of me that I couldn't resist all your attempts at friendship. You're quite a remarkable human being, Bram Mantock."

"You are extraordinary," he said, and the awe that covered his face was humbling.

I shook my head. "I don't know how you can be so understanding."

He shrugged. "I think life has a way of pushing us to our limits. And until we are pushed to the very edge, we never know what choices we'll make. You chose not to harm someone, despite the consequences for yourself and your family—that's who you are."

I looked away, across the pond. "It was terrifying to see just how close I got to choosing wrong."

"But you didn't, and that's the thing that matters."

"Do you suppose you'll ever forgive me?" I asked, my voice quiet.

"I already have."

I turned to him in awe. A smile curved my lips as I saw the way he looked at me. Then I glanced down at his hands and saw that he was holding the locket. I sucked in a breath, confused.

"Faelyn."

I looked up at his face, my expression no doubt questioning. He just continued to look in my eyes while he gave a quick flip of his wrist and tossed the locket to the side. My eyes followed it as it arced over the water and then made a tiny splash as it sank beneath the surface. I blinked. He'd really just done that.

I turned back and found him still looking at me. "Are you going to go after that?" I asked.

"No. I told you I love you, and I meant it," he said with a tender smile.

He'd said it so easily, with such confidence, that I couldn't help but believe him. This man, whom I'd met less than two weeks ago, had made himself a part of my heart, and by some miracle, it seemed I'd also become part of his. Still, any path forward for us would not be easy, and I had to ask. "Do you love me enough to come with me? To fight to get my father's kingdom back? Do you love me enough to leave everything behind and—"

"Yes," he stated, leaning closer, "to all of it."

Tears pricked my eyes. "Really?" Could he truly be that good?

He leaned in more. "Really," he whispered, and slowly but fervently pressed his lips to mine, letting his love pour over me until I was warmed through and there was no room for doubt.

The End

Please enjoy a preview of Princess Ariella and Sir Gavin's story, *Just Ella*. If you are interested in my other fairytale retellings, [my Tales of Winberg series can be found on Amazon](#).

Just Ella

Chapter 1

I'll admit that my decision was impetuous. Only the crates and barrels crammed into the wagon would hide me from view as it pulled away from the kitchens, but it was my best chance. The supply wagon had just been sitting there, and upon overhearing the men talking about their plans to visit the caravan of traders in the village, the possibility of a taste of freedom made me reckless.

So here I sat, bumping along, hoping I could make it through the gates without being caught.

I dared to peek around a barrel to check on my progress and saw that we were rounding the edge of the castle. We had only to make it through the gardens and we would be at the gate.

Crouching down once more, I sent a plea to heaven that my ramshackle plan might succeed, but only a moment later, a guard called the wagon to a halt.

Cursing my luck, I scooted back and ducked even lower, anticipating a good amount of disappointment and humiliation. I heard a ripping sound as I moved and knew that a hole had been torn in my dress. I ignored it and held my breath, hoping the wagon would be allowed to move on without an inspection.

"Princess."

I scrunched my face in irritation and looked up at the guard gazing down at me. I stood, knowing my adventure was over. The guards surrounding the wagon were no surprise; however, the swords pointed threateningly at the drivers were.

"What are you doing?" I demanded.

"Are you well, Princess?" asked one of the guards.

"Of course I'm well." I tripped over crates and scrambled out of the wagon bed, ignoring the hands that offered assistance. "And these men had no idea that I was in their wagon until you made them stop. Put your weapons down at once."

"You got in on your own?" The guard's confusion was understandable, but I still found it irritating.

"Yes, now let these men be on their way."

As they reluctantly lowered their swords, I noticed several servants watching the spectacle, and started to worry about the potential ramifications of my actions. I had only a moment to hope that my mother would not be told before I heard her voice ring out across the courtyard.

"Ariella."

My stomach dropped and I looked up, then immediately back down as I encountered the eyes of the queen, so similar to mine, as she stood rigid on the palace steps.

"Coming, mother." Gathering my poise, I hurried past the baffled guards and confused servants, my head held high as I joined my mother.

The fact that she had witnessed my failed adventure only added to my humiliation. I followed her into the castle and up the stairs to the sitting room attached to my parents' chambers.

The door shut with a snap. "Explain yourself."

I sighed, resigned to simply tell the truth. "The caravan of traders have come and I wanted to see them."

"So you decided to go in the back of a supply wagon?"

"It's not as though there's any other way I would be able to go."

"There is nothing amid the trinkets of traders that would interest you, and travelers are notorious swindlers. But that is not really the point, is it? Why would it even enter your head to attempt to ride out of the palace in the back of a wagon? Why, Ella?"

I didn't know how to answer.

"It's dangerous. Do you not know that? Do you know what it looks like when you so openly defy me?"

I kept silent.

"Your defiance, your complete lack of decorum and your sneaking around the servants does not look right and it *must stop*."

I stared at the ground and clenched my teeth, trying to keep the hurt at bay. My mother was embarrassed by me. "I don't *sneak* around them. I'm just interested in the things they do."

Her tone softened a fraction. "I know that you are curious; you always have been. But if you insist on indulging your curiosity, then you will not do so in *public*." I could feel her gaze boring into the top of my head, but I refused to look up and it wasn't long before I heard the retreat of her footsteps and the sound of the door as it snapped shut.

I stared out the window onto a spectacular view of Dalthia. The palace lawn sloped down past the gardens to meet the wall surrounding the extensive grounds. Beyond that barrier, the common village sprawled out until it met the river, which wove through the dense trees like a silk ribbon through a braid. On the other side of the river were the houses belonging to the nobility, and far beyond what I could see, nestled between rolling hills, rested many outlying villages and estates.

But I was too caught up in my own thoughts, my own hurt and disappointment, to appreciate any of it.

“Fine,” I muttered defiantly. If my mother wanted me to hide where no one would see me, then I would go back to the maze.

I hurried down the grand staircase and out the door without acknowledging the guards in my usual friendly manner.

Making my way through the public portion of the gardens, I held my head high, knowing that several noblemen might be following my movements with their curious eyes. The palace served not only as my home, but as the central meeting place for all government. The landlords who oversaw the outlying villages had regular meetings with my father, as did the magistrates and peace officers. I expected the scrutiny of noblemen, but still hated it.

A smile tugged at the corners of my mouth as I reached the hedge walls of the maze and entered. I inhaled the intoxicating fragrance, remembering the hours my sisters and I had spent running through this house of nature.

The maze had been my playground as a child, but at twelve years old I was pronounced too old for such frivolity. So I had stayed away. Because I *wanted* to do as I was told—to be everything they expected me to be. But clearly, my ability to act properly had not been helped by avoiding the maze. So it was with a fair amount of spite that I returned here now.

Walking into the rooms of nature-grown walls, I saw a great deal of change since I used to play here—or perhaps I just saw it differently. Compared to the rest of the gardens, the maze was much less tidy. Some plants and bushes grew into the paths I followed; others had climbed the hedges and hung overhead, their blossoms dripping from the sky.

The maze was arranged with narrow pathways mingling with wide open rooms. A few of the rooms were almost entirely enclosed, but most tended to run into each other in a rambling, nonsensical way.

The scent of lilac and roses filled my lungs, easing the tension in my shoulders. I wished I could take down my light hair so the breeze could blow through it, but I knew that I wouldn’t be able to tame it into submission myself. I loved my hair, but its thick, loose curls made it unruly.

It was difficult to remember the layout of the maze, but I found a round room with every color of rose bush sweeping the perimeter, surrounding a large tree in the center. I remembered the tree and was happy to discover that my height, combined with the height of a bench now situated beneath it, would allow me to climb it.

I chewed my bottom lip and cast my eyes around to see if I dared attempt such a thing now. I hiked my skirts and stepped onto the bench, then grabbed a limb and used the back of the bench to lift me higher before pulling myself into the branches of the tree. Fifteen years old. A princess. And still I did it.

Fifteen years old, but in just a few weeks I would be sixteen, and I dreaded the day. Somehow I knew that Prince Jeshua would start to pursue me in earnest once I was all of sixteen. Avoiding him had become a talent of mine over the years and was one of the reasons I was so good at being places where I didn’t belong. He could have chosen any one of my sisters, but he had fixated on me. I pushed the unpleasant thought aside and climbed higher.

Pleased with my own daring, I looked at the leaves surrounding me and realized I was largely obscured from the view of anyone not standing directly below the tree. I stepped carefully from branch to branch, hoping I might watch people unobserved from this height.

Once I could see above the hedge, I found a gap in the leaves and gazed around, proud of my success as I watched a visiting nobleman and woman as they strolled arm in arm. I looked farther and caught sight of a gardener I’d never seen before. He was quite young, not much older than myself, and rather rough looking. He dressed in earth tones—a loose fitting shirt and brown breeches. He was tall and lean with dark, tousled hair. A satchel hung across his body, some sort of foliage sticking out of it. When my eyes returned to his face, I realized that he had stopped his work to watch me, his eyebrows raised.

Then he smiled—not as though he were being polite or tactful, but just because he was amused. Because of me.

My eyes widened and I crouched down. Apparently I wasn’t as well hidden as I had thought. What was I thinking? If my mother heard of my antics, she would put an immediate end to any and all excursions.

I started to make my way down. If I could get out of this tree without anyone else seeing me, then perhaps I could find another tree in a more secluded corner of the maze, or one with thicker leaves.

I was just about to step onto one of the lowest branches when the gardener appeared just a few paces from the tree.

“Stay aloft a bit longer. There is someone coming.” He disappeared before his words had fully registered. When they did, I found myself hugging the large trunk and hoping that whoever ventured near would soon be gone.

I heard their approach and tried to take even breaths. Through the gaps in the leaves, I caught glimpses of the couple as they strolled, unconcerned, along the path and out the other side.

As their voices faded, I breathed easier until a noise startled me.

The gardener had jumped onto the bench below. “All clear, Miss.” The lightness in his face and voice left me stunned until he reached a hand toward me. “Do you need a hand?”

I lowered myself, hoping to look dignified—or at least as dignified as one can look when climbing a tree—but didn’t know how to get out of the tree once I ran out of branches.

"Sit down here." He slapped the lowest branch and I did as he bade, my legs dangling as I prepared to lower myself.

"Hands on my shoulders now."

My eyes widened, but I did as he asked. He grabbed hold of my waist and lowered me to the bench. My hands dropped from his shoulders and I tried not to stare.

"You're all right then?" he asked.

"I don't usually climb trees."

He quirked a corner of his mouth. "That I had already guessed." He jumped from the bench then handed me down. "I've not seen you wandering the maze before."

My mind was a jumble. I wasn't used to people speaking so freely with me. My silence seemed to remind him of our difference in station and his face lost its laughter. He stepped back.

"A good day to you, My Lady."

He turned but I stopped him. "I thank you," I blurted. "For your—assistance."

He inclined his head, pinching the brim of his hat. "A pleasure."

"I'm Ella," I said on impulse. It was an almost unconscious decision, introducing myself as Ella. Only my family knew me as Ella. Perhaps I would have felt too high and mighty introducing myself to this down-to-earth, rough character, as Ariella—Her Royal Highness, the princess—Ariella.

Instead of lightly grasping the tips of my fingers and bowing low over my hand, as I was accustomed to, he took hold of my hand with both of his and gently inclined his head while smiling at me with his eyes. "Glad to meet you, Ella." I gave a small, inaudible gasp. No one outside of my family addressed me without my title. No one. I wondered for a moment if he were being purposefully disrespectful, but he seemed entirely unaware of the gaffe. "My name is Gavin."

I gave a fleeting curtsy and replied, "A pleasure," out of habit. I knew I must have had the appearance of a startled deer—eyes wide and wary, rooted to the spot.

"What brings you to this portion of the gardens? I'm not used to seeing people strolling all by themselves."

"Oh, well," I stumbled, knowing very well that he hadn't seen me *strolling* at all.

"Hiding away?" He seemed genuinely curious about this point.

"I suppose."

"Hm." He seemed a bit puzzled. "I have never seen a noble who wished to hide away."

"I'm not nobility." It was an automatic response because it was the truth.

"Oh, you're not?" he seemed amused by this. "Then perhaps a lowly servant who has stolen her mistress' clothing? Or maybe the daughter of a dressmaker, taking liberties with her parents' goods?"

That's when I realized he hadn't recognized me. He must have never had the opportunity of seeing me up close. I suddenly appreciated my impulsive decision to introduce myself as Ella. Perhaps if he could get to know me—even a little bit—before he found out who I was, then...I don't know...we could be friends? Was that even possible?

"So, you assume if I'm not nobility, I must be a thief?" I tried to sound affronted, but felt a bit giddy about the whole situation, and ended up sounding more amused than anything.

His grin broadened. "And what would you have me believe, miss? I'm no expert on dresses, but I know it takes a lot of coin to look as good as you do right now."

My mouth dropped open a bit. "I believe that is the most backhanded compliment I've ever received, sir."

"Sir?" he let out a laugh. "The lady in the fine dress calls me 'sir,' and I'm to believe you are not noble?"

"And what exactly do you have against nobility?"

"Nothing, really. I'm simply used to working for what I want and need. Nobility already have that and so they seem a bit..." He trailed off.

"What?" I asked in horror. If he had such a low opinion of nobility, I couldn't imagine what he would think of me.

"Well, lazy, if you must know."

I let out a breath of disbelief and searched my mind for an argument.

"You know," he continued, "for a person who claims *not* to be nobility, you've certainly got your feathers ruffled."

"You think that because I am given less responsibility than others that I have less value in society?"

Compassion crossed his face, as though sorry to see my distress over the matter. "No. You are simply a different sort of society—one I don't understand."

"But we are all part of the same society."

He laughed, but stopped himself quickly. "That, miss, is entirely untrue. I am surrounded by nobility constantly, but I do *not* interact with them. I'm completely separate—they don't see me." The fact that he did not recognize me made it difficult to argue the point.

An inexplicable sadness settled over me. I was speaking with one of my subjects who believed he was unimportant and invisible. And I could do nothing about it.

"That's really what you believe?" I asked, hoping, perhaps, he was exaggerating or joking.

He gave me a sad smile and shrugged. "I apologize if my bluntness offends you. I figured you would leave if you were upset by me."

"That would be very rude of me."

"It's what I'd expect."

"Why? Because that's what a noble would do?"

"Well." The confusion was back, forcing him to make a slight concession. "Any other noble." It was somewhat gratifying that he no longer felt compelled to lump me with the nobles he despised. However, the fact remained—I wasn't a noble. And I knew he would think even less of me when he knew what I was.

I wouldn't lie. "I told you, I'm not—"

"Come now, Ella. Your tree climbing hasn't got me fooled." He used an almost paternal tone, his eyes laughing. "You are nobility, aren't you?"

I buried my hurt. "No, I'm something worse."

"Oh, come now, I don't think that badly of people. The only thing that might be worse is royalty." How charming he was, even when insulting me.

I stood silent for a moment, wondering if he would catch on. When he continued to gaze at me, I simply said, "Exactly."

A look of horror crossed his face and I gave him a sad smile before turning to leave.

"Oh," I heard him stuttering behind me, sounding utterly mortified. "No, I...my apologies, miss—Your Highness," he corrected himself sharply. "Princess, I'm so very sorry, I..."

I shook my head as I turned to face him again. He looked so different: the confidence, the grin, the amusement were all gone, replaced with a look akin to physical pain. "It's all right," I said quietly. "You're not wrong." I should have inclined my head, waiting for him to bow before I left. Instead I lifted my hand in farewell.

Unwilling to return to the palace, I walked deeper into the maze. My conversation with Gavin had not ended well, but that was no reason to give up my explorations. Coming here had been *my* choice, and I would not leave until I *wanted* to leave. Admittedly, I was disappointed. Speaking with Gavin had been enjoyable; he had been open and had a charming, teasing manner. It was a shame our first encounter would be our last. Even if he didn't despise me for my station, he would no longer be comfortable conversing with me. I was a royal—a lazy, entitled royal.

I was mortified anyone would perceive me that way. And the worst part was that he was right. None of my talents or endeavors were really useful, and I also despised royalty some of the time. Royal suitors were frequent guests in a castle that housed seven princesses. And though some were pleasant enough, I had met my fair share of princes who were supreme examples of arrogant, entitled royalty. Prince Jeshua was one of the worst. Perhaps that's why it bothered me so much. I found being put on the same level as those I scorned appalling.

I entered one of the open rooms and sat down amidst the lush greenery and fragrant blooms, trying to decipher my feelings. I was sad and angry and insulted, yes. But Gavin had sparked another feeling. I felt invigorated—more invigorated than I ever had while defying my parents and evading royal guests, and I was anxious for this excitement to last.

[Just Ella can be found on Amazon...](#)

To My Readers

Thank you for reading! If you enjoyed *To Betray a King*, please recommend it to others!

I hope my faithful readers enjoyed returning to the Kingdom of Dalthia and seeing lots of familiar characters again. And for any new readers, there's plenty more where that came from (including [Kinley's story](#))!

All the advertising in the world cannot compare to real people recommending my books to their friends. Please take a minute to leave a review (a sentence or two is great) for other potential readers on Amazon, Goodreads, or anywhere else. Word of mouth is essential for me to get the word out, so if you enjoyed reading Faelyn's story, tell a friend! Take a photo of the book and post it on social media. Tag me. I'd love to see my readers out in the world.

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Acknowledgements

First off, a HUGE thank you to my Shattered Tales collaborative group. I loved being invited and participating in this series. Getting to know all of you has been such a pleasure. You were all so lovely and supportive and I'm glad to know you.

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Thank you to my husband, Cameron, and all our kids for reveling in the weirdo life with me. You all make me smile every day.

The Shattered Tales

The Shattered Tales is a collection of twelve fractured retellings of your favorite fairy tales. They can be enjoyed in any order, so fall in love with the sweet romance, magical adventures, and tale-shattering twists one happily-ever-after at a time!

To Shatter a Slipper by Abigail Manning

To Betray a King by Annette K. Larsen

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To Crack a Soldier by Sarah Beran

To Rival a Reflection by Selina De Luca

To Destroy an Illusion by Kendra E. Ardnek

To Capture a Beauty by Kimberly Pearl

About the Author

I love words. I always have. In songs, in poems, in books, in movies—words move me. In my younger years, I dabbled in writing as a therapy and an escape, but I never expected it to become more than that. While deep in the depths of mommying several small children, I took seven years to write my first book, *Just Ella*. During that time, I taught myself how to write a novel through a tremendous amount of trial and error. Not the most time-efficient method, but it gave me an education I wouldn't have received from a class or a how-to book. Something about the struggle of writing without a formula or rules worked for me. I wrote for me. I wrote from my heart space, and I think that's the reason that *Just Ella* has found room in so many of my readers' heart spaces.

I write clean romance because I love it. I love the discovery of new love. I love the relationship building that's done with looks, words, brushing fingers, and tentative kisses. Jane Eyre is the hero of my youth and taught me that being true to yourself and clinging to your convictions will be hard, but it will bring you more genuine happiness than giving up on yourself ever can.

I am an extraordinarily happy wife and a mother of five kids. I've lived in Utah, Arizona, Missouri, and Virginia, but my heart is now firmly ensconced in Idaho where we've built a home and a community.

I love chocolate, waterfalls, pretty teacups, the sight and sound of ocean waves, and most especially my husband and my five kids. I love books that leave me with a sigh of contentment, and I aspire to write stories that do the same for my readers.